

## Active and affective dimensions of pronunciation learning in EFL education

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### Abstract

*This theoretical paper examines the role of pronunciation within the action-oriented conceptualization of language learning promoted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). While contemporary approaches increasingly define language competence as the capacity to act through language, the position of pronunciation within this framework remains underexamined, particularly in relation to learners' affective engagement. The paper, therefore, seeks to explore how pronunciation may be understood as an active dimension of EFL education and how its development is intertwined with motivation as an affective dimension. The paper indicates that pronunciation functions as a mediating resource between linguistic knowledge and communicative action and that its development is strongly influenced by motivation. Pronunciation thus emerges as a domain in which the active and affective dimensions of language learning closely interact. The paper concludes that viewing pronunciation as encompassing both active and affective dimensions offer a more integrated understanding of communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** CEFR, action-oriented approach, communicative competence, pronunciation, motivation, active and affective dimensions

### Introduction

In recent decades, foreign language education has undergone a profound reconceptualization, moving away from a view of language as a system of forms to be learned towards perspectives that emphasize language as a means of social action (Council of Europe, 2020a; Piccardo & North, 2019). Within this shift, increasing attention has been paid to the ways in which learners participate in communicative practices and develop the capacity to act through language in meaningful contexts (Engeström, 1995; Germain-Rutherford, 2021). This orientation is particularly salient in EFL settings, where opportunities for authentic language use are often limited (Kirkpatrick, 2007) and where the classroom becomes the primary place for developing communicative agency (Council of Europe, 2001).

At the same time, this reconceptualization raises questions concerning the status of individual components of language competence. If language learning is understood primarily as an action, it becomes necessary to reconsider how specific skills and systems contribute to learners' ability to participate in interaction and to construct themselves as competent language users. Among these components, pronunciation occupies a distinctive position. It directly mediates between linguistic knowledge and communicative performance (Cai et al., 2025), yet it has often been treated as not significant in both theory and practice (Harmer, 2007; Scrivener, 2005).

Equally significant is the role of affect in this process. Language learning does not take place in a neutral cognitive space, but it is shaped by learners' motivation (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). In the present paper, the affective dimension becomes inseparable from the development of phonological competence.

Against this background, the present paper offers a reflection on pronunciation learning within the framework of the CEFR and its action-oriented approach (Council of Europe, 2020a). It seeks to articulate how pronunciation may be understood as an active dimension of EFL education and how its development is intertwined with motivation as an affective dimension. By bringing together these perspectives, the paper aims to contribute to a more integrated understanding of how language, action, and affect cooperate in the formation of communicative competence.

### **Language learning as action in EFL education**

English as a foreign language (EFL) can be recognized in nations where the language is not widely spoken or utilized in everyday life. Learners in these nations usually have fewer opportunities to use the language outside the classroom than learners for whom English is their second language (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Considering this, EFL learners may have to be more proactive in seeking opportunities to learn and use the target language. Subsequently, teachers should enable them to do so to the same extent.

In response to these educational demands, language learning in EFL education is increasingly conceptualized as an active process that involves learners' engagement in meaningful language use rather than the passive acquisition of linguistic knowledge (Council of Europe, 2020a). This shift in conceptualization is strongly reflected in the revised version of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR), which is regarded as a binding framework for countries in the European Union when discussing teaching and learning EFL.

The CEFR builds upon the developments made with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and formally proposes the implementation of an action-oriented approach, which was introduced in the 2001 edition of the framework. This approach understands the learners to be "social agents" (Council of Europe, 2001: 9) who are capable of exercising agency when using language, "thus seeing language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study" (Council of Europe, 2020a: 29). In other words, language competence is therefore not defined primarily as the possession of linguistic knowledge, but as the capacity to act through language in a specific communicative context.

This reconceptualization reflects a broader theoretical shift to a more complex perspective, instead of a linear one, foregrounding the contextual and situated character of language and its use, thereby emphasizing the importance of the notion of action in both general and theoretical frameworks (Engeström, 1995). Accordingly, the action-oriented approach aims to establish action as a central principle in language education and to exploit its full potential for learning and teaching (Piccardo & North, 2019).

From a didactic perspective, this orientation entails a fundamental redefinition of the roles of learners and teachers, "transforming the roles of learners into social agents and teachers into facilitators" (Germain-Rutherford, 2021: 95). In the traditional approaches, learners were closely guided by the teacher, whereas in the action-oriented approach, they assume an active role and make informed decisions about their learning process (Ismail & Kumar, 2023). In this context, the teacher's role is to support this process and foster the development of learner autonomy (Piccardo & North, 2019). The teacher is responsible for implementing the curriculum by creating an environment that facilitates learners' successful participation in a society and for providing support for their personal and educational development (Ismail & Kumar, 2023).

This conceptualization also has important implications for the treatment of individual language skills and systems within EFL education. If language competence is defined in terms of action, then the development of a specific component of competence should, in return, be understood in relation to learners' ability to participate in communicative activity. Among these components, pronunciation occupies a particularly significant position, as it directly conditions learners' capacity to communicate successfully (Cai et al., 2025), hence, to produce intelligible speech (Council of Europe, 2020a). As such, pronunciation is an important resource that helps learners to act through spoken language.

This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining pronunciation as an active dimension of language.

### **Pronunciation as an active dimension of EFL education**

In language pedagogy, the four skills are commonly classified into receptive skills, namely listening and reading, and productive skills, namely speaking and writing (Harmer, 2007; Hinkel, 2006; Scrivener, 2005). From this perspective, speaking, as a productive skill, requires learners to actively produce language, and pronunciation constitutes an essential component of this productive process (Prodanovska-Poposka, 2017). As such, pronunciation is conceptualized as the production of speech sounds through which language is realized in acts of speech (Monika et al., 2019). It therefore follows that pronunciation belongs to the active

dimension of EFL education, as it directly participates in the productive use of spoken language. Despite its central role in this dimension, pronunciation frequently receives limited attention in language teaching (Harmer, 2007; Scrivener, 2005). This situation appears problematic, as it contrasts with the long-established position of pronunciation within communicative competence.

Indeed, pronunciation has traditionally been regarded as a core element of communicative competence in the teaching and learning of the English language. Beyond its role in ensuring comprehensibility, it also contributes significantly to learners' construction of linguistic identity and to their confidence as language users (Kholid & Hidayat, 2025).

For a considerable period, EFL pronunciation pedagogy was strongly oriented toward native-speaker standards, most notably Received Pronunciation (RP), which functioned as the dominant norm of accuracy and prestige in the European Union context, where it was predominantly British English that was taught (Roach, 2009). With the expansion of English into a global lingua franca used by speakers from a wide range of linguo-cultural backgrounds (El Garras, 2025; Hülmbauer et al., 2008; Melitz, 2016), the long-standing emphasis placed on approximation to native-like pronunciation has been frequently challenged (Jenkins, 2000; Hülmbauer et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2021).

This development has prompted a redefinition of what constitutes success in pronunciation learning. Contemporary approaches no longer view the imitation of native accents as the primary objective. Instead, they emphasize intelligibility as the key criterion for effective communication (Král'ová et al., 2021; Hinkel, 2006). Consequently, current pedagogical perspectives increasingly favor communicative functionality over conformity to native standards (Savignon, 2005).

This emphasis on intelligibility has also been incorporated into the revised version of the CEFR and its action-oriented approach (Council of Europe, 2020a), as the intelligibility perspective supports the development of communicative competence (Henderson, 2021), which is central to the framework as a whole.

The communicative competence itself consists of three interrelated components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence (Hymes, 1972). This classification is also reflected in the revised version of the CEFR and further enriched by additional subcategories. One such subcategory under linguistic competence is phonological control, encompassing pronunciation. This subcategory is further elaborated through three subcomponents: overall phonological control, sound articulation, and prosodic features (Council of Europe, 2020a), reflecting the multidimensional nature of pronunciation.

Within each subcomponent of the CEFR, "can do" descriptors can be found (Council of Europe, 2020a: 27). These descriptors strengthen the central position of the action-oriented approach, as they define language competences in terms of what learners at a given proficiency level are able to do with the language (North, 2022). However, some of the descriptors related specifically to pronunciation (see CEFR, pp. 134-135) are formulated as definitions rather than can do descriptors concerned with actions. Even with that, the remaining descriptors align with the stance of the action-oriented approach, where the learners are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, nor are they perceived as objects limited to acquiring a predetermined range of task-specific abilities (Piccardo & North, 2019).

About instructional content, evidence suggests that pronunciation instruction is most effective when it incorporates both segmental and suprasegmental features rather than addressing either one in isolation (Lee et al., 2015), which is also reflected in the CEFR's action-oriented approach.

At the same time, pronunciation learning cannot be fully understood without consideration of the affective factors that influence learners' engagement with the spoken language, which invites a closer examination of the role of motivation in shaping learners' development in pronunciation learning.

### **Motivation as the affective dimension of pronunciation learning**

While affect in language encompasses a range of variables, the present paper focuses specifically on motivation as a central affective construct. This focus is intentional, as motivation directly drives learners' engagement with the language learning process (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993), making it particularly relevant

within the action-oriented approach.

According to the Pedagogical Dictionary (2009), motivation consists of internal and external factors that initiate and maintain human behavior, directing it towards specific goals. These factors influence the intensity and duration of actions, determine whether goals are reached or avoided, and prompt individuals to reflect on their behavior, assess their successes and failures, and consider their interaction with the surrounding environment. When discussing motivation in the context of pronunciation learning, attention is directed to motivation for doing something, defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2020: 1018) as “the feeling of wanting to do something, especially something that involves hard work.” As such, it is argued that “motivation is the key to all learning” (Lile, 2002, Introduction section).

From an affective perspective, motivation plays a crucial role in shaping the extent to which learners engage effectively with the language learning process (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993), as it is frequently driven by an internal desire to succeed (Crystal, 2003). In this sense, motivation introduces an affective dimension into the cognitive process through which learners determine the experiences or aims they will pursue or avoid, as well as the degree of effort they are willing to invest in them (Nguyen, 2019).

As such, motivation to acquire a certain English pronunciation would be seen as a kind of achievement motivation. This concept was first introduced by Atkinson and further developed in collaboration with Raynor in *Motivation and Achievement* (1974). Achievement motivation is therefore typically situated within those theories of motivation that are centered around expectancy-value theories, which propose that learners' behavior is shaped by their expectation of success in a particular activity and the perceived value of success in the given activity (Williams et al., 2015). Within this framework, some learners may strive for more accurate pronunciation because success is the predominant source of motivation as opposed to recurrent failure (Harmer, 2007).

The degree of motivation will thus vary depending on how much importance learners attach to the result they wish to attain (Williams & Burden, 1997). This may indicate that learners with higher levels of motivation are more likely to develop more advanced pronunciation skills. This idea is reinforced by the concept of two cycles that illustrate the dynamic relationship between motivation and achievement. The first cycle flows from high motivation to high achievement and back to high motivation. Hence, this is the positive cycle. The second cycle, on the other hand, moves from low motivation to low achievement and back to low motivation. Therefore, this is the negative cycle (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Nevertheless, it is important to make a distinction between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation to better explain why the affective dimension plays such a crucial role in pronunciation learning. “Extrinsic motivation is the result of any number of outside factors” (Harmer, 2007: 98). These factors include mainly society, significant others, teachers, and methods (Harmer, 2001). With intrinsic motivation, the factors come from within a person. Defined, intrinsic motivation is “the generalized desire to invest effort in the learning for its own sake” (Ur, 2000: 280). This distinction heightens the importance of internal factors in the process of learning pronunciation, because “most researchers and methodologists have come to the view that intrinsic motivation produces better results than its extrinsic counterpart” (Harmer, 2007: 98) and the probability that a learner will successfully learn to pronounce intelligibly is increased if they are intrinsically driven to do so and enjoy the learning experience (Harmer, 2001). Even if intrinsic motivation holds considerably greater significance within education (Lile, 2002), extrinsic motivation cannot be neglected since the learner, as the aforementioned social agent, engages in certain activities for particular reasons and under particular circumstances (Piccardo, 2014), which in itself entails a certain level of extrinsic motivation. Moreover, a sociolinguistic aspect to the process of pronunciation learning is added. Consequently, through the use of linguistic and sociocultural repertoires, learners actively participate in important real-world scenarios, learning to respond in both cognitive and emotional senses (Germain-Rutherford, 2021). This gives their learning a purpose, as language use is directly linked to meaningful action. Recognizing this reason for learning pronunciation is inherently motivating for language learners (Puchta, 2021).

Furthermore, the action-oriented approach is characterized by learner-centeredness (Council of Europe, 2020b), which is motivational for language learners as it fosters a sense of cooperation and mutual respect

(Puchta, 2021), with a strong emphasis on the authenticity of materials and tasks, with learners determining how to complete scenario-based assignments in groups, which helps them to develop soft skills and maintain motivation as learners “prefer cooperative tasks – including pair work and teamwork” (Kamenická, 2022: 42). Additionally, mediation is integrated into language learning, and self-assessment is commonly employed as part of the evaluative process, which is motivating for learners as they prefer other forms of assessment (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011). Therefore, the action-oriented approach should be taken into account as it can be motivating because of its specific aspects.

Although motivation has been foregrounded as the central affective factor in this discussion, it is not the only factor influencing pronunciation learning. Among these, foreign language anxiety (FLA) and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) have received considerable attention in research.

FLA refers to a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). It encompasses a variety of negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, worry, stage fright, nervousness, stress, frustration, and self-doubt (Lojová, 2021). Importantly, higher levels of anxiety have been associated with lower motivation and reduced language achievement (MacIntyre, 2007).

In contrast, FLE reflects positive emotional engagement in language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). It is linked not only to feelings of pleasure but also to cognitive involvement, curiosity, and a sense of challenge (Boudreau et al., 2018). Enjoyment may arise from social interaction, personal satisfaction, or supportive teaching practices (Botes et al., 2021) and has been shown to positively relate to both motivation and language proficiency (Zhang et al., 2020).

### **Implications for EFL education and research**

The preceding discussion of language learning as action, pronunciation as an active dimension, and motivation as an affective dimension in EFL education provides several implications for both EFL education and research. If language competence is conceptualized primarily as the capacity to act through language in meaningful communicative contexts (Council of Europe, 2020a; Piccardo & North, 2019), then the treatment of pronunciation can no longer be purely technical. Instead, pronunciation should be understood as an essential resource that enables learners to participate in social interaction and to exercise agency as social agents (Council of Europe, 2001). From this perspective, the development of phonological competence is not merely a matter of accuracy, but a condition for successful action through spoken language.

This implies that pronunciation instruction should be systematically integrated into communicative and action-oriented teaching. Given that pronunciation belongs to the active dimension of EFL education and directly participates in productive use of language (Prodanovska-Poposka, 2017; Monika et al., 2019), it should be embedded in tasks that reflect authentic communicative purposes. The action-oriented approach, with its emphasis on the performance of meaningful actions (Council of Europe, 2020a; Piccardo & North, 2019), provides an appropriate framework for such integration.

Furthermore, the shift from native-speaker norms towards intelligibility as the primary criterion of success (Kráľová et al., 2021; Hinkel, 2006; Yazan, 2015) has directed pedagogical consequences. Teachers are encouraged to prioritize communicative functionality and comprehensibility over conformity to idealized models of pronunciation, especially in international contexts (Jenkins, 2000; Walker et al., 2021). This orientation aligns with CEFR’s focus on phonological control as part of linguistic competence and with its use of “can do” descriptors that define proficiency in terms of learners’ ability to perform actions with language (Council of Europe 2020a; North, 2022).

At the same time, instructional content should address both segmental and suprasegmental features in an integrated way, as evidence suggests that such an approach is more effective for the development of pronunciation competence (Lee et al., 2015).

Equally important are the implications concerning the affective dimension of pronunciation learning. The discussion of motivation here indicates that learners’ engagement with pronunciation is strongly influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Harmer, 2007; Ur, 2000), as well as by their expectations of success and the perceived value of achievement (Williams et al., 2015). In this respect, pronunciation learning can be

viewed as a dynamic process in which motivation and achievement reinforce each other (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

For educational practice, this suggests that teachers should create learning environments that foster intrinsic motivation by providing meaningful tasks, supportive feedback, and opportunities for successful communicative action (Piccardo, 2014; Germain-Rutherford, 2021; Burcl, 2023). By linking pronunciation to authentic purposes and to learners' participation in socially relevant activities, the action-oriented approach may contribute to strengthening learners' motivation (Puchta, 2021).

From a pedagogical perspective, these principles may be operationalized through specific classroom practices. For example, teachers may incorporate pronunciation into task-based activities such as role-plays, simulations, or collaborative problem-solving tasks, where learners use spoken language for meaningful purposes. Techniques such as guided repetition (e.g., shadowing), peer interaction, and self-recording may further support pronunciation development while fostering learners' motivation (Harmer, 2007; Puchta, 2021). In this way, pronunciation practice becomes both action-oriented and affectively engaging.

From a research perspective, the present text highlights the need to examine pronunciation not only as a phonetic or phonological phenomenon, but as a multidimensional construct situated at the intersection of the active and affective dimensions of EFL education. Further research may therefore benefit from investigating how learners' phonological development interacts with motivational processes, learner autonomy, and participation in communicative action within an action-oriented approach (Council of Europe, 2020b; Piccardo & North, 2019), as well as prompt further development of the can-do descriptors for phonological control to better suit the position of pronunciation. In addition, while motivation has been foregrounded in this discussion, further research may explore the role of additional affective variables in shaping pronunciation learning within action-oriented frameworks. Furthermore, such research may contribute to the development of empirically grounded pedagogical activities that effectively connect action-oriented pronunciation teaching with motivation as a driving force of learners' learning process.

Taken together, these implications underscore the role of pronunciation within an action-oriented conception of EFL education. When pronunciation is treated as an active resource for communication and when its development is supported by motivationally rich learning environments, it can contribute not only to learners' intelligibility but also to their ability to act through language.

## Conclusion

The present paper has sought to articulate a perspective on pronunciation learning that situates it at the intersection of action and affect in EFL education. By drawing on the action-oriented approach of the CEFR and on theories of motivation, it has argued that pronunciation emerges as a mediating dimension through which learners transform linguistic knowledge into communicative action.

Viewed from this perspective, pronunciation appears as a particularly suitable system for examining the cooperation between the active and affective dimensions of EFL education. The ability to produce intelligible speech conditions learners' participation in interaction, while their willingness to invest effort and to persist in pronunciation learning is shaped by motivational processes that are embedded in social experience. The action-oriented approach provides a coherent framework for capturing this interdependence, as it foregrounds agency, authenticity, and meaningful participation as central principles of language learning.

Moreover, the paper suggests that the relationship between language and action cannot be reduced to observable performance alone. It is sustained by affective forces such as motivation, which orient learners toward or away from communicative engagement and shape their development over time. Recognizing pronunciation as encompassing both an active and affective dimension thus invites a more comprehensive understanding of communicative competence.

In this sense, pronunciation learning goes beyond a domain-specific concern. It constitutes a conceptual bridge between action and affection, illuminating the complexity of EFL education.

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