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Learning English pronunciation in and outside the classroom: Psychopedagogic considerations

1. Introduction

The claim that pronunciation teaching has—for a long time now—been seriously neglected in foreign language classrooms is common to researchers (e.g. Harmer 2007, Henderson *et al.* 2012, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2008, Underhill 2010, Vernon 2009) and language learners. Strangely enough, it is not necessarily seen as a problem by language teachers, who seem to believe either that foreign pronunciation is ‘unteachable’, or, on the contrary, that it will ‘take care of itself’ through learners’ exposure to spoken language. In any case, regardless of textbook writers’ efforts to include pronunciation practice activities into the teaching syllabus, learners are often left alone with their attempts to master this aspect of language proficiency. This issue will be discussed in the present paper, with EFL classrooms in Poland serving as an example of teachers’ limited role in the learners’ ultimate attainment in the area of English pronunciation. The present qualitative study was an attempt to analyse the attitudes of adolescent learners of English to the status of pronunciation practice in their classrooms.

2. Changing approaches to pronunciation in the EFL classroom

If Adrian Underhill refers to pronunciation teaching today as ‘the Cinderella of language teaching’ (Underhill 2010), it has certainly been through tougher times in the years of EFL history. As Jones (2002) states,

the fortunes of pronunciation teaching have waxed and waned. Irrelevant in the Grammar Translation approach, pronunciation grew in prominence with the rise of the Direct Method and Audiolingualism, only to be pushed again to the sidelines with the ascendancy of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Natural Approach (...) Today, pronunciation teaching is experiencing a new resurgence, fuelled largely by the increasing awareness of the communicative function of suprasegmental features in spoken discourse. (Jones 2002: 178)

Michael Vaughan-Rees, in an article marking the 20th anniversary of the IATEFL PronSIG (Vaughan-Rees 2006), presented a comprehensive account of what happened in the field of pronunciation teaching during that time and how the attitudes of all those concerned were changing. The following significant changes have taken place in the last two decades:

- Our knowledge of ‘what actually happens when people speak’ improved, following the publication of Cauldwell’s (1992) ‘Of streams and bricks: new ways of presenting the spoken language to learners’, where he demonstrated that although speech elements are typically described in terms of discrete units, learners perceive spoken language outside the classroom more like a ‘stream’; he also pointed to the possibilities of implementing computer technology into research of authentic speech.
- Jennifer Jenkins published her influential paper (Jenkins 1997), in which she offered a new perspective of what used to be known as the ‘common core’ in pronunciation teaching, attempting to adapt it ‘for a world in which English was no longer the private domain of native speakers’ (Vaughan-Rees 2006: 26). Jenkins (1997) claimed that for the majority of learners the acquisition of a native-like accent can no longer be treated as the ultimate goal, due to the fact that their primary motivation for learning English is not communication with native speakers, but rather the ability to interact with non-native speakers of English, with a variety of L1 backgrounds.¹
- The notion of *intelligibility* (Kenworthy 1987)—which had been perceived as an aim in pronunciation teaching for a long time, however with an implication that the pursued model was a standard version of native-speaker English and the person to judge the degree of intelligibility was a native speaker—acquired a new dimension, in view of the fact that ‘an estimated 80 per cent of conversations in English worldwide (...) don’t involve a native speaker (...) and natural native speaker strategies can make conversation more difficult’ (Vaughan-Rees 2006: 27).
- The concepts of ELF (*English as a Lingua Franca*), as well as related terms EIL (*English as an International Language*), *World English* and *Global English* began

¹ In Jenkins’ definition of the ‘common core’ little importance is attached to vowel quality (except where vowel length is involved), certain features of connected speech (e.g. assimilation, weak forms), word stress, pitch movement, the production of the ‘th’ sounds (Jenkins 2011).

to be widely discussed in relation to all aspects of teaching and assessing English as a foreign or second language (e.g. House 2003; Hülmbauer 2007; Jenkins 2007; Seidlhofer 2004, 2006), which naturally further influenced the attitudes to non-native pronunciation, including voices questioning the use of native speaker pronunciation models in the teaching of English, as 'not necessarily the most intelligible or appropriate accents when a non-native speaker is communicating with another non-native speaker' (Jenkins 2011). This could further lead to claims that for a learner of English sounding native-like might, paradoxically, turn out to be a disadvantage in the international context.

- Following the arguments quoted above, the role of non-native teachers of English (*NNS teachers*) was reassessed (Majer 2012), from the position that they should not be treated as 'models' of pronunciation towards the claim that they might in fact be better instructors, having greater empathy and understanding of the learners' pronunciation problems, and—having been through the process themselves—being more aware of 'what is or is not intelligible to other users of English, be these L1 or L2 users' (Vaughan-Rees 2006: 27).
- Psychological considerations were raised, connected with learners' attitude to 'perfect' pronunciation, along with suggestions that sometimes students simply do not want to sound like 'inner circle' (Kachru and Nelson 1996: 78) speakers, or they may wish to retain their 'foreign' accent, which they consider part of their identity (Harmer 2007: 249).
- As observed—among others—by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2008: 212) and Pawlak (2010: 169), there has been an upsurge of interest in pronunciation among both researchers and teacher trainers.

In addition to the described developments—partially as their result and partially we should probably say in spite of them—the last two decades have brought successful attempts to integrate pronunciation teaching into 'mainstream' teaching, followed by the appearance of numerous course books featuring pronunciation tasks and exercises on a regular basis, on par with grammar and vocabulary based activities. It can be safely stated that in contemporary English course books, on all levels of proficiency, pronunciation focus has become an obvious component, although the typical exercises are often criticized as insufficient. Underhill (2010) talks about 'an essentially behaviourist paradigm of listen, identify, discriminate and repeat'; Jones (2002: 178) goes further along the lines of criticism, claiming that 'most commercially produced course books on pronunciation today present activities remarkably similar to the audiolingual texts of the 1950s, relying heavily on mechanical drilling of decontextualized words and sentences'. The general agreement, however, is that teachers can find incomparably more guidance in pronunciation teaching today than it was possible to find 20 years ago, even if the suggested activities are far from ideal.

3. Teacher attitudes

There seems to be a consensus today among ELT methodologists concerning remarkable progress achieved in the field of teaching English as a foreign language during the last few decades. This is particularly noticeable in the techniques of teaching grammar and vocabulary in context, productive skills and functional dialogues, as well as in the creative use of modern language teaching materials. Teachers are well trained in implementing attractive activities in teaching different age groups at different levels. However, as Jeremy Harmer notes,

some of these same teachers make little attempt to teach pronunciation in any overt way and only give attention to it in passing. It is possible that they are nervous of dealing with sounds and intonation; perhaps they feel they have too much to do already and pronunciation teaching will only make things worse. They may claim that even without a formal pronunciation syllabus, and without specific pronunciation teaching, many students seem to acquire serviceable pronunciation in the course of their studies anyway. (Harmer 2007: 248)

Shelley Vernon suggests a different reason for teachers' reluctance to become more involved in pronunciation instruction:

Many English teachers avoid teaching pronunciation, not because it is not necessary, but because they have little or no information on the subject. (Vernon 2009: TEFL.net)

This argument is supported by the claim made by Underhill (2010) that pronunciation teaching constitutes 'a mysterious zone' for most teachers. He further states that pronunciation can be seen as

the poor relation of language teaching, poorly related to the rest of what happens in the language classroom. Teachers do their best to integrate pronunciation but for many it remains a supplement to the main diet of most lessons, often relegated in lessons and course books to 'pron slots'. (Underhill 2010: teachingenglish.org.uk)

In many Polish schools the situation reflects the above diagnoses. One may assume that several learners do not get sufficient explicit commentary and adequate pronunciation practice. Teachers—especially at lower levels—very rarely use phonemic charts or phonemic script, although the symbols appear in textbook exercises. Pronunciation errors are notoriously perceived as less important than structural or lexical errors and very often remain uncorrected. As observed by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2008),

pronunciation [...] is largely neglected, with emphasis put on grammar and vocabulary. Thus, only a few selected features of English phonetics are occasionally practiced, with the use of a small repertoire of traditional techniques, mostly of the 'listen and repeat' type, based on limited teaching resources. (p. 213)

4. The study

If the above assumptions concerning teachers are true, it is interesting to examine the learners' attitudes to English pronunciation in the situation where it is generally not considered to be a major issue in the classroom. The study described further in this paper was conducted in March 2012 and it involved adolescent learners of English in the Polish educational context.²

4.1. Aims, research questions and hypothesis

The purpose of the study was to examine the sources of English pronunciation accuracy in a group of Polish teenage learners, in view of the previously discussed assumed inadequacies of classroom instruction. The following research questions were put forward:

- Do English teachers actually neglect pronunciation in their teaching procedures and error correction routines?
- Is good pronunciation perceived by learners as a valid indicator of foreign language competence?
- What are the sources the learners use outside the classroom that influence their English pronunciation?

It was hypothesized that the widely manifested superiority of grammar and vocabulary in language instruction would have affected the learners' opinions about the relatively lower importance of pronunciation. Considering the age of the learners (14-15- year-olds), it was supposed that their English language skills would be largely influenced by computer games, the internet and pop music, with travelling abroad and contacts with native speakers of English having less visible impact.

4.2. Participants and procedure

A questionnaire prepared in Polish (Nowak 2012) was administered to 100 middle school learners during their English classes. The study involved five groups of second- and third-grade students—48 boys and 52 girls. Their level of proficiency could be described as ranging from pre-intermediate to intermediate; it is worth pointing out that 40 of those students participated in the extended English programme, with 6 hours of English per week, the regular curriculum providing 3 hours of English instruction per week. The more advanced learners used *'Going for Gold'* and *'FCE Gold Plus'* (Pearson-Longman) as their main textbooks in the

² The data referred to in this study were collected by Małgorzata Nowak and partially used in her BA dissertation (Nowak 2012).

second and third grade, respectively; the lower level students—following the regular curriculum—used the *'New Challenges'* series (Pearson-Longman). The factor worth noting is that neither of those textbooks contains specially designed pronunciation exercises, which is surprising and unusual, because such exercises—sometimes constituting separate pronunciation sections—regularly appear in most English textbooks available on the market which have been published in the last 10 years.

The original questionnaire analysed by Nowak (2012) consisted of 13 questions addressed to the learners, following initial demographic information about the participants' gender, age, number of years of studying English and travels to English speaking countries. As our purpose in this paper is to illustrate certain general assumptions about teaching English pronunciation and not to provide a detailed analysis of one school learning context, which may not be typical or fully representative, in the present discussion only some aspects of the respondents' answers will be described—the ones which include controversial or in a way surprising opinions. For the same reason, no attempts have been made to apply any statistical instruments to the obtained data.

4.3. Discussion of the results

The background information questions provide us with the information that most of the 14-16-year-old students participating in the study have been studying English for 8 or 9 years (65 students), which means that they started English classes at the very beginning of primary school. For 28 participants English instruction must have begun in kindergarten, as they marked 10, 11 or even 12 (10 students) or 13 years (3 students) in their answers. Such a long period of uninterrupted language study should theoretically result in a high level of proficiency, not necessarily confirmed by the observed level of their language abilities.

When asked about the experiences of travelling abroad, only 22 learners out of a hundred admitted having been to any English speaking country.

Five questions in the questionnaire referred to the learners' perceptions of the relative importance of the pronunciation component in the process of foreign language learning. The answers showed very high ratings of 'good pronunciation', which comes as a surprise in a situation when teachers seem to favour grammar in their teaching attempts, and in the era of communicative approach, treating 'intelligibility' and not native-like mastery as a realistic goal in pronunciation teaching. Learners were asked to choose 'the most important—for them—aspect of studying English'; while 'vocabulary', as it might be expected, was rated the highest, 'pronunciation' came second, with only 26 points assigned to 'grammar'. At the same time, interestingly, when asked to point to the most difficult area in studying English, they unanimously chose grammar, with only one student(!) selecting pronunciation. When asked to decide—on a scale from 1 to 5—to what

extent correct pronunciation matters in attaining foreign language skills, the vast majority (83 students) chose 4 or 5 points. Additionally, 85 students claimed that they 'pay attention to correct pronunciation while speaking English', which is a very encouraging result. The last question in this area asked the learners whether they pay attention to how other people speak English and whether they notice their pronunciation mistakes, which 32 learners answered positively, while 54 responded with 'sometimes'; only 14 respondents do not seem to pay attention to others' way of speaking English.

From what several ELT methodologists have claimed it can be concluded that pronunciation gets most attention from both teachers and learners when new vocabulary items are introduced; this assumption was confirmed by the respondents of the study, 81 of whom acknowledged that they concentrate on pronunciation and stress when learning a new English word. Particularly their concern with word stress is a very good sign; however, during classroom observations it could be seen that word stress is the source of several errors in the learners' production, thus it may be suspected that the learners' answers reflected their beliefs in what should be done in the classroom rather than actual classroom practice. This conclusion is supported by the learners' reactions to a related question, concerning their making use of phonetic transcription when checking a word in a dictionary: only 29 students pay attention to the transcription, 71 never do that. It is difficult not to conclude that they are not encouraged by teachers to do so; perhaps not even acquainted with the phonetic symbols.

When asked a predictable question about teachers' reactions to pronunciation errors in the classroom, the learners gave their teachers credit for being reasonably concerned with pronunciation standards: 89 learners say that they are corrected 'often' or 'sometimes'.

Questions seeking the common sources of the students' contact with authentic, spoken language elicited answers which were far from unexpected, with 'music' and 'the internet' clearly being rated the highest—78 and 61 students, respectively—it was possible to select several options. Films came next, followed by 'contacts with friends and family abroad' (18 students), playing games, and 'additional English lessons'—surprisingly low in the ranking (only 14 students).

5. Conclusions

Although it would be difficult to claim that the above presented findings are fully representative and truly reflect Polish middle school learners' attitudes to pronunciation study, certain interesting tendencies can be noticed. The following tentative observations seem to be worth pointing out:

- Contrary to the initial predictions, learners appear to be convinced that correct pronunciation is a significant indicator of perceived foreign language proficiency and they attach considerable importance to mastering this subsystem.

- As it was hypothesized, teachers do not give priority to pronunciation: although errors are corrected with reasonable frequency, no pronunciation exercises are introduced, little attention is paid to word stress, learners are not familiarized with phonetic transcription or informed about its possible benefits, neither are learners encouraged to check pronunciation when they consult dictionaries about unknown words.
- It is common for teenage learners to rely on additional—outside the classroom—sources for native-like pronunciation models; while this fact is in accordance with the initial assumptions, it seems strange, however, that additional English lessons (private lessons, afternoon language courses), although frequently part of learners' language education, are rarely mentioned in the context of extended pronunciation practice.
- Conclusions from learners' answers and comments fully support Jeremy Harmer's claim that 'the fact that some students are able to acquire reasonable pronunciation without overt pronunciation teaching should not blind us to the benefits of a focus on pronunciation in our lessons' (Harmer 2007: 248).

Learners' comments referring to English pronunciation revealed that in spite of the teachers' neglect and in spite of the general tendency to concentrate on 'comfortable intelligibility' (Kenworthy 1987: 3), without pursuing pronunciation goals beyond basic communicative success, for a great majority of learners native-like pronunciation remains a desirable—if not entirely realistic—objective. This attitude corresponds with what Wells (2005) stated, commenting on students' personal aspirations in the era of English as an International Language:

Different students in the same class of school or university may well have rather different aims.

Some just want enough English to communicate at a basic level, or indeed just enough to pass some examination. Others aim to achieve the best they possibly can. We must cater for both types and for those who fall somewhere between. Speaking personally, I must say that my own aspiration in learning languages is NS-like proficiency. I acknowledge that I may be unlikely to attain it. But that doesn't stop me aiming for it. I try to inspire my students with the same high ideal. If it were suggested that I should not even aim so high, I should feel short-changed. (Wells 2005: 402)

It is impossible not to fully agree with the above claims, although—as Vaughan-Rees rightly observes—only a minority of our students will really want to sound as close to native speakers as possible, yet there are several learners who 'absolutely want to understand native speakers' (Vaughan-Rees 2006: 27), and they should be granted the opportunities to be exposed to native-speaker accents, both RP or General American, but also regional native accents. The further suggestion that learners might also benefit from materials using 'the speech of educated non-native speakers: scientists, politicians, artists, business people' (Vaughan-Rees 2006: 27) looks very interesting and falls in line with the earlier mentioned undisputable

fact that numerous learners are more likely to use English in the ELF context—in communication with other non-native speakers.

Finally, it ought to be said that even if English teachers perceive the importance of pronunciation, they still tend not to concentrate on goals which are considered strategic. As advocated by Szpyra-Kozłowska and Stasiak (2010), “phonetic instruction should, first and foremost, focus not on segments and suprasegments, but on the pronunciation of whole words, particularly those ones whose distortion might lead to communicative problems” (p. 12). On the other hand, while this general recommendation for teachers of English concerning pronunciation instruction, as well as the suggestion by Wells quoted above, namely ‘to concentrate on the matters that most impede intelligibility and to exploit the findings of contrastive analysis to help pinpoint likely areas of difficulty’ (Wells 2005: 407), remain perfectly valid in the Polish school context, Polish teachers should also be made more aware of the potential of pronunciation-focused activities included in modern textbooks. Ignoring them, which seems to be often the case, acts against the expectations of those numerous learners whose ambitions concerning English pronunciation are high. Moreover, teacher training programmes in Poland would certainly benefit from increasing the amount of attention devoted to the area of pronunciation, including the ability to use phonemic symbols effectively in the classroom, because the teachers’ general reluctance to refer to them may indeed result from lack of knowledge, as the earlier (cf. Section 3) quotations from Vernon and Underhill would suggest. As Jeremy Harmer points out,

Despite what we have said about identity and the global nature of English (and the use of ELF), some students do indeed wish to sound exactly like a native speaker. In such circumstances it would be absurd to try to deny them such an objective. (Harmer 2007: 249)

However, as noted by Tavakoli (2011: 71), the question whether learners of English should conform to native-speaker norms is a much broader educational issue. This topic, both pedagogical and sociolinguistic, would clearly go beyond the confines of the present paper.

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Appendix

Questions included in the questionnaire (Nowak 2012), selected for discussion:

1. Which is—for you—the most essential aspect of studying English? Choose between ‘vocabulary’, ‘grammar’, ‘pronunciation’, ‘spelling’, ‘reading’.
2. Which aspect of English is the most difficult for you to master?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, decide to what extent correct English pronunciation is important for you.
4. Do you pay attention to pronunciation accuracy while speaking English? (Yes, definitely; yes, sometimes; no, definitely not)
5. When you listen to other people speaking English, do you notice their pronunciation mistakes?
6. When you are introduced to a new word in English, do you pay attention to its pronunciation and word stress?
7. When you look up a word in a dictionary, do you notice the phonetic transcription and make use of it?
8. Do your English teachers correct errors in pronunciation?
9. Which sources outside the classroom help you to improve English pronunciation? (You may name as many as you wish).