The content analysis of English textbooks for primary schools – teaching pronunciation

İlkokullar için İngilizce ders kitaplarının içerik analizi – telaffuz öğretimi

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Abstract: The main objective of the study is the content analysis of textbooks most frequently used to teach English at primary schools in Slovakia (English Plus, Project and MORE!) with the focus on teaching pronunciation. Pronunciation exercises are analysed according to the practised phonic subsystem (segmental or suprasegmental), applied teaching technique and form of work (individual, pair, group, or whole-class). The results revealed that mostly suprasegmental phonic subsystem is practiced in the textbooks through pair work and whole class involvement and there is a preponderance of drill technique in the analysed textbooks.

Keywords: Content analysis, English textbooks, teaching pronunciation, phonic subsystem, techniques, form of work

Öz: Çalışmanın temel amacı, telaffuz öğretmeye odaklanan Slovakya'daki ilkokullarda (English Plus, Project ve MORE!) İngilizce öğretmek için en sık kullanılan ders kitaplarının içerik analizidir. Telaffuz alıştırmaları, uygulanan fonik alt sisteme (segmental veya üst düzey), uygulamalı öğretim tekniğine ve çalışma şekline (bireysel, çift, grup veya tüm sınıf) göre analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, çoğunlukla üst düzey fonik alt sistemin ders kitaplarında ikili çalışma ve tüm sınıf katılımı yoluyla uygulandığını ve analiz edilen ders kitaplarında tekrar tekniğinin bir üstünlüğünün bulunduğunu ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İçerik analizi, İngilizce ders kitapları, telaffuz öğretimi, fonik alt sistemler, teknikler, çalışma şekli

INTRODUCTION

Teaching foreign language pronunciation was more or less ignored until late nineteenth century (Kelly, 1969). An intuitive-imitative approach dominated the early 20th century followed by the analytic-linguistic approach resulting in a contemporary post-communicative approach (Kralova, 2009). However, pronunciation is still the most neglected language system in teaching EFL (English as a foreign language) compared to teaching vocabulary and grammar. Teachers often claim that they do not have enough time to teach pronunciation (Gilbert, 2008) or they do not feel confident enough to teach it (Reid, 2014).

The main complaint of Slovak EFL teachers is that pronunciation exercises are rare in most textbooks and what is more, they are monotonous and focused only on drill and repetition of English sounds which is boring for their pupils (Soradova *et al.*, 2018). Reid (2014) believes there are no apparent instructions and rules in course books and that individual exercises are not effective enough. However, teaching proper pronunciation is crucial especially to young learners who are able to create new or modify old articulation stereotypes. Therefore, we decided to analyse the textbooks most frequently used in Slovak primary schools with the focus on teaching pronunciation.

Phonic system is traditionally divided into segmental and supra segmental subsystems and both approaches to teaching foreign language pronunciation, BOTTOM-UP (segments first) and TOP-DOWN (suprasegments first) have proved their pros and cons (Levis, 2005). Different forms of class organisation of learners can be applied in both approaches – individual/pair/group work or whole-class participation (Harmer, 2001).

The Common European Framework for Languages (2001) recommends teaching pronunciation right from the beginning of foreign language learning via contact with authentic spoken language and combination of different teaching techniques. The recommended techniques for teaching English pronunciation are:

Drilling: it is based on repetition of structural patterns orally and puts emphasis on forming habits and memorizing a new item with an accurate pronunciation (Tice, 2004). It has been used for many years as a basic technique of pronunciation teaching and has its roots in audiolingualism (Kelly, 2000). There are several subtypes of drilling: imitation drill is the simplest type; substitution drill includes a change of one or more words during the training, and transformation drill requires learners to change the form of a structural item into another one. However, several methodologists (e.g. Harmer, 2001) express disagreement with drill overuse, since making mistakes is a key part of learning.

Ear training: it is focused on listening to various types of perception exercises, e.g. minimal pairs, dictations, quizzes or listening tasks (Reid, 2014).

Reading aloud: it can effectively practice not only individual words, but also various aspects of connected speech such as rhythm and intonation (Kelly, 2000).

Songs, chants, rhymes and tongue-twisters naturally interconnect segmental and suprasegmental levels of pronunciation (Woodall & Ziembroski, 2012) and have significant corrective and cultural functions (Brown, 2006).

METHOD

Research objectives

The primary research objective was to analyse the selected EFL textbooks focusing on sections teaching English pronunciation according to the criteria: 1) phonic subsystem practised (segmental or suprasegmental), 2) form of work (individual, pair, group, whole-class) and 3) teaching technique used. Taking into account the above-mentioned facts and Slovak EFL teachers' opinions and perceptions (Reid, 2014; Soradova *et al.*, 2018), three research questions were formulated:
   1. Which subsystem of the phonic level prevails in the analysed English textbooks?
   2. What is the dominant form of work involving learners in the analysed English textbooks?

3. What is the most frequently used pronunciation teaching technique in the analysed English textbooks?

Research sample

Three sets of textbooks most frequently used for teaching EFL at Slovak primary schools (Soradova *et al.*, 2018) were selected. The textbook sections practicing English pronunciation were the material for the analysis.

English Plus is published by Oxford University Press. This set includes Starter textbook and Level 1–4 textbooks emphasizing equally the development of all four skills in each unit. In addition, "The Rules" section gives space for learners to identify and acquire language rules themselves, "New Language" section offers both individual forms and their contextualized examples and "Activate" and "About You" sections encourage learners to use English in order to express their personal experience and ideas. The enclosed audio CD in each textbook provides various recordings as well as DVD enclosed with Level 1–4 textbooks containing extra video clips to enrich and make the experience of English-speaking world more authentic. "English Plus iTools" offer an opportunity for interactive teaching.

Project is published by Oxford University Press. It is a five-level English course popular among teachers and students all around the world. To inspire the new generation of young learners, Project offers contemporary content, but structured learning process. New topics, texts and activities including comics, songs and stories are appealing part of this set. Learners may broaden their experience of culture in "English across the Curriculum" section in every unit of every level. DVD and audio CD assure that the learning process is interesting and captivating through the contact with aspects of life in English-speaking countries. Regular progress check on revision pages highlight learners' results and "Project iTools" provide learners an opportunity to activate themselves in an interactive and funny way.

MORE! is published by Cambridge University Press. It is a four-level course with dedicated reading, grammar, vocabulary, culture, skills and cross-curricular sections. Each level provides up to 90 hours of class material. Additionally, the set offers not only "Learn MORE about Culture" section in each textbook, but also "Check Progress" section after two successive units. CD-ROMs, DVDs with supportive materials and interactive content are enclosed, but apart from them also the "Cyber Homework" which offers two sets of online exercises with automatic assessment as well as "MORE! Online" accessible via website.

Research method

Content analysis was used to analyse the selected textbooks from the pre-determined criteria considering an exercise practicing pronunciation to be one coding unit. The descriptive type of quantitative content analysis was applied to label the relevant data segments (Dorney, 2007). The pre-ordinate coding categories (Cohen *et al.*, 2007): 1) phonic subsystem (segmental, suprasegmental); 2) form of work (individual, pair, group, whole-class) and 3) teaching technique were applied deductively to the data. The analysis was done by two independent researchers (an experienced EFL teacher and an EFL student-teacher) to increase reliability of the analysis.

Procedure

1. The research questions to be addressed by the content analysis were formulated.
2. The research sample was selected.
3. The units of analysis were defined.
4. The categories of analysis were constructed: phonic subsystem, form of work, teaching technique.
5. The codes within each category were specified (segmental, suprasegmental; individual, pair, group, whole-class; see Introduction).
6. The coding and categorizing of the data was conducted.
7. The frequencies of occurrence were counted.
8. The statistical analysis using tabulation and graphical representation was applied.

9. The analysed textbooks were compared within the categories of analysis.

RESULTS

The first two criteria – phonic subsystem and form of work – are disjunctive which means that they have the same total number of exercises expressed by percentage ratio of occurrence. The third criterion – teaching technique – presents numerical representation of the collected data since the possibility that several techniques may be used within a single exercise.

Phonic subsystem
As shown in Table 1, the highest total number of pronunciation exercises is in the Project set and the lowest in the English Plus textbooks. Suprasegment-focused exercises significantly outnumber the segment-focused exercises in all textbook sets with English Plus containing hardly any exercises practising segmental subsystem (Figure 1). The total number of pronunciation exercises decreases from the first textbook to the last in each set.

Table 1. *Phonic subsystem – number of pronunciation exercises*

Pronunciation subsystem	English Plus (Starter)	English Plus (1)	English Plus (2)	English Plus (3)	English Plus (4)	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5	MORE! Level 1	MORE! Level 2	MORE! Level 3	MORE! Level 4
segmental	1	0	0	0	0	13	12	11	8	6	6	5	3	2
suprasegmental	24	19	14	10	9	23	20	12	12	12	30	23	23	12
TOTAL			**77**					**129**					**104**	

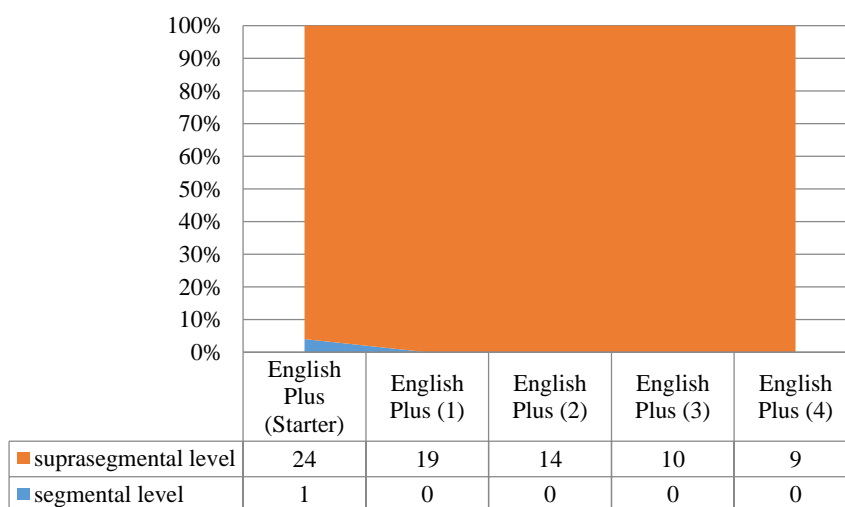|	English Plus (Starter)	English Plus (1)	English Plus (2)	English Plus (3)	English Plus (4)
■ suprasegmental level	24	19	14	10	9
■ segmental level	1	0	0	0	0

FIGURE 1 *English Plus textbooks – phonic subsystem*

The exercises practicing both phonic subsystems (segmental 1/3, suprasegmental 2/3) are included in the whole Project set (Figure 2). The number of pronunciation exercises gradually declines within the set.
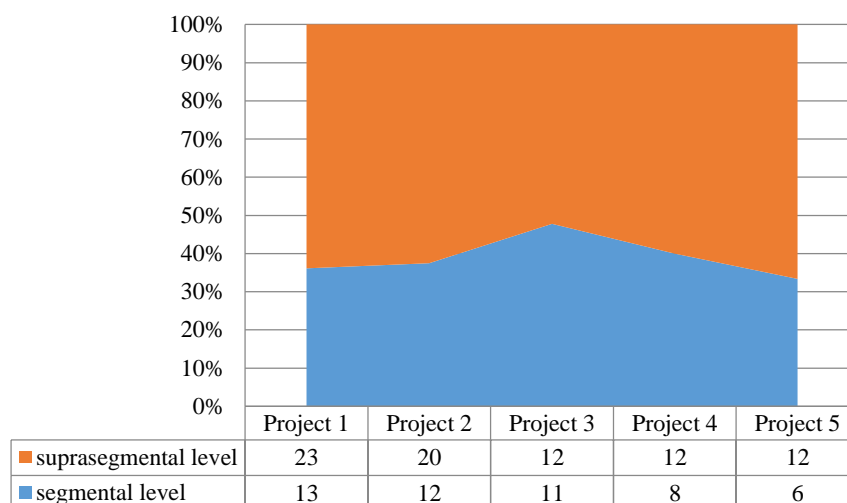
	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5
■ suprasegmental level	23	20	12	12	12
■ segmental level	13	12	11	8	6

FIGURE 2 *Project textbooks – phonic subsystem*

"MORE!" textbooks provide majority of exercises focused on suprasegmental level maintaining a similar ratio between segmental and suprasegmental exercises within the set (Figure 3). The total number of pronunciation exercises decreases in each following textbook.
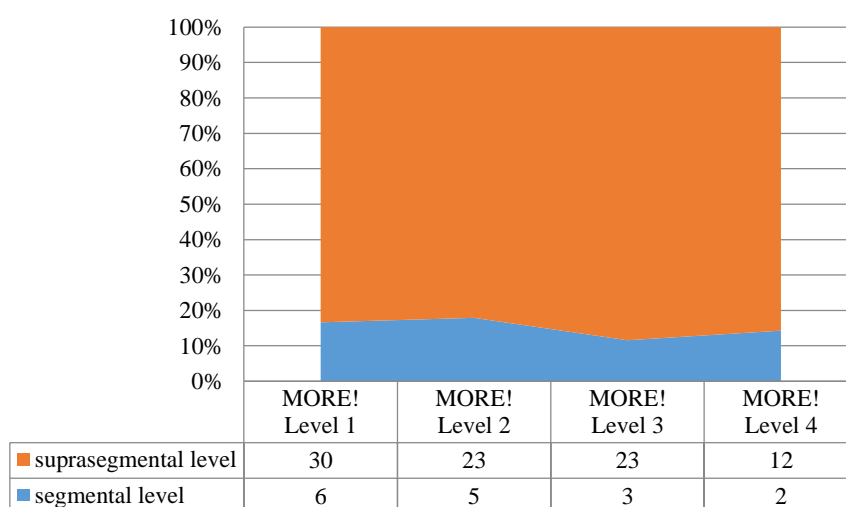
	MORE! Level 1	MORE! Level 2	MORE! Level 3	MORE! Level 4
■ suprasegmental level	30	23	23	12
■ segmental level	6	5	3	2

FIGURE 3 *MORE! textbooks – phonic subsystem*

Form of work

Both English Plus and MORE! textbooks offer variable number of pair-work and whole-class exercises while Project textbooks provide only whole-class involvement activities (Table 2).

Table 2. *Form of work – number of pronunciation exercises*

Form of work	English Plus (Starter)	English Plus (1)	English Plus (2)	English Plus (3)	English Plus (4)	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5	MORE! Level 1	MORE! Level 2	MORE! Level 3	MORE! Level 4
pair work	7	15	9	7	9	0	0	0	0	0	7	4	14	8
whole class	18	4	5	3	0	36	32	23	20	18	29	24	12	6
TOTAL	**25**	**19**	**14**	**10**	**9**	**36**	**32**	**23**	**20**	**18**	**36**	**28**	**26**	**14**

As it is seen in Figure 4, pair work prevails in the whole English Plus set except English Plus (Starter) where whole-class involvement dominates.
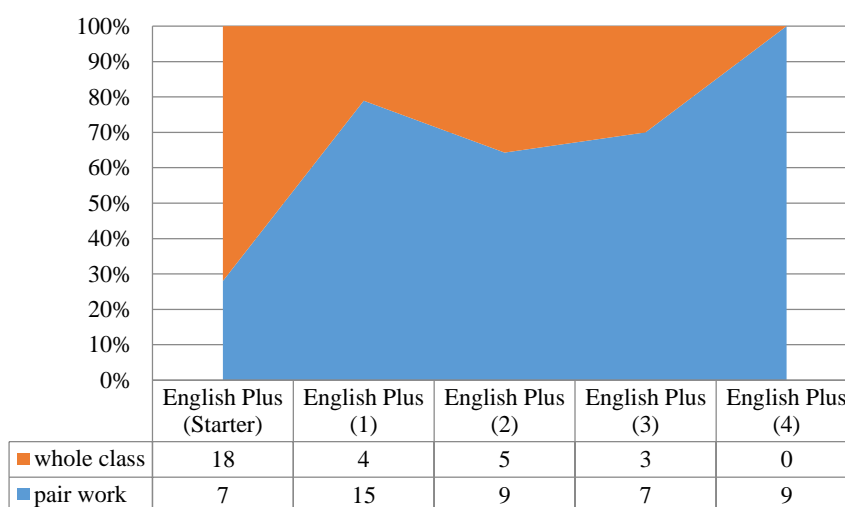

	English Plus (Starter)	English Plus (1)	English Plus (2)	English Plus (3)	English Plus (4)
whole class	18	4	5	3	0
pair work	7	15	9	7	9

FIGURE 4 *English Plus textbooks – form of work*

The one-colour Project chart (Figure 5) reflects the sole use of whole-class organisation in the whole set of textbooks.
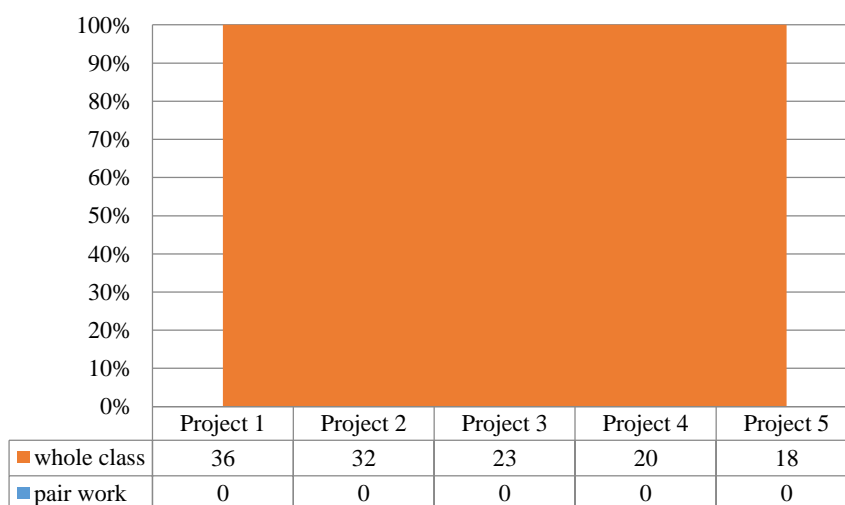

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5
whole class	36	32	23	20	18
pair work	0	0	0	0	0

FIGURE 5 *Project textbooks – form of work*

MORE! set of textbooks offers majority of pronunciation exercises for the whole class with a decreasing trend towards a balanced ratio between the pair and whole-class organisation in MORE! Level 4 (Figure 6).
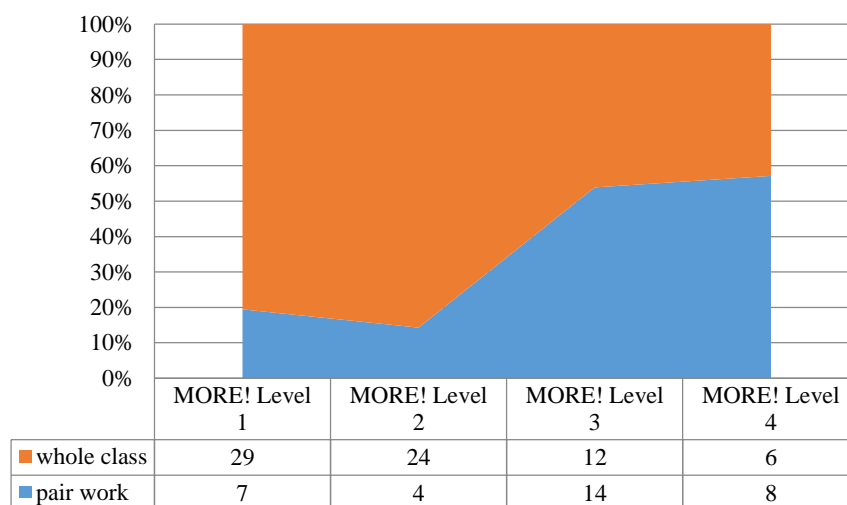

	MORE! Level 1	MORE! Level 2	MORE! Level 3	MORE! Level 4
whole class	29	24	12	6
pair work	7	4	14	8

FIGURE 6 *MORE! textbooks – form of work*

Teaching technique

The teaching technique criterion does not correspond with the total number of all exercises, since several teaching techniques were applied within one exercise (Table 3). Songs or chants, tongue-twisters, rhymes and reading aloud were only rarely applied while drilling and ear training prevailed in all the analysed sets of textbooks.

Table 3. *Teaching technique – number of pronunciation exercises*

Teaching technique	English Plus (Starter)	English Plus (1)	English Plus (2)	English Plus (3)	English Plus (4)	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5	MORE! Level 1	MORE! Level 2	MORE! Level 3	MORE! Level 4
drilling	23	19	14	9	9	26	21	20	19	17	29	21	24	11
ear training	3	6	4	1	0	17	22	13	14	15	5	6	3	4
song or chant	1	0	0	0	0	5	6	1	0	0	7	7	1	1
tongue-twister	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
rhyme	0	0	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
reading aloud	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0

Drilling was the most frequently used technique for teaching pronunciation in all three analysed sets with a slightly decreasing tendency within each set (Figure 7).
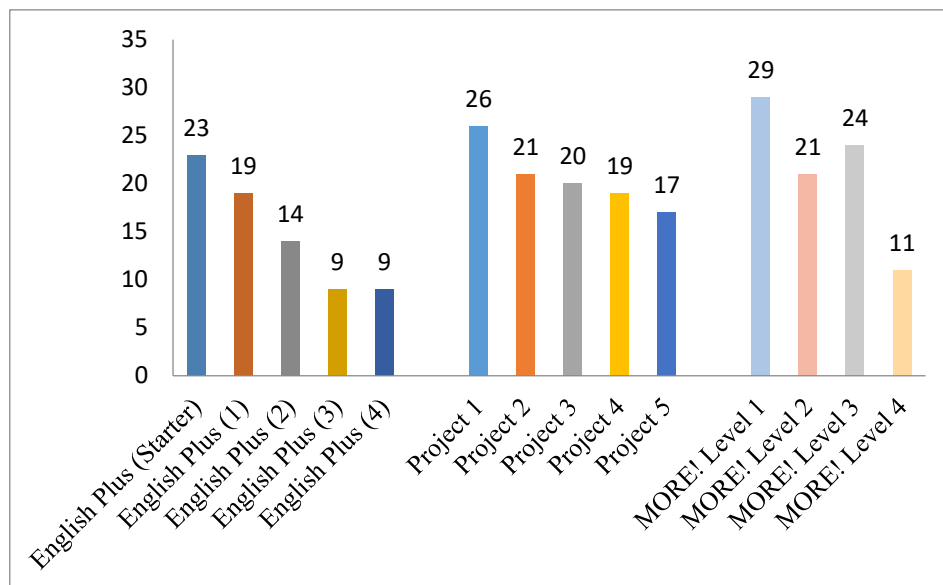
FIGURE 7 *Teaching technique – drilling*

From Figure 8 it is obvious that Project textbooks favour the ear training technique. Both English Plus and MORE! textbooks provide significantly lower number of such exercises.
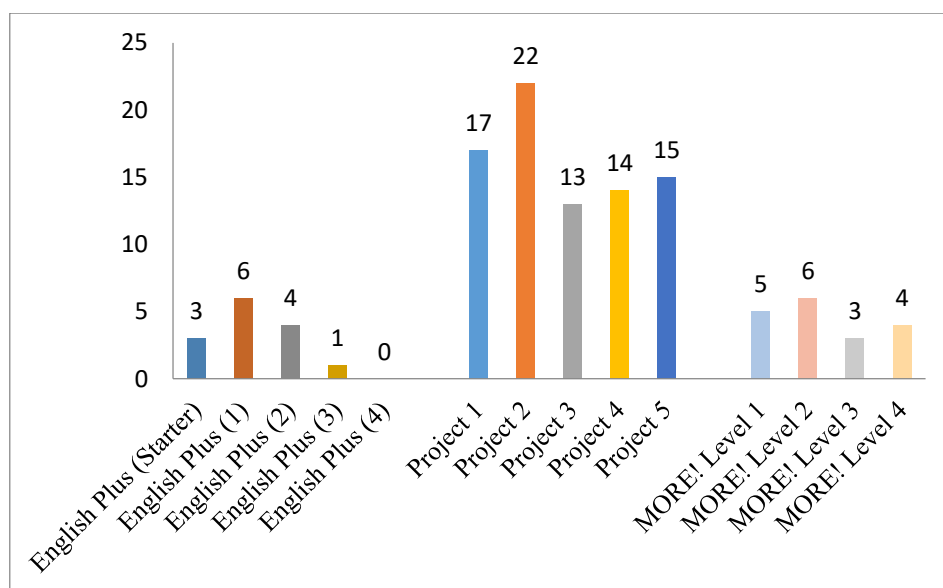

FIGURE 8 *Teaching technique – ear training*

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The analysed textbooks preferably practice suprasegmental aspects of English pronunciation in a whole-class involvement applying mostly drilling as a teaching technique. Therefore, the complaints of Slovak EFL teachers that pronunciation exercises in most textbooks are monotonous and focused on drill and repetition only (Soradova *et al.*, 2018) are partly justified. Intuitive and imitative learning dominating in a very early age is gradually transformed to cognitive and analytical type of learning during maturation (Harmer, 2001). The mere imitation drill is thus not sufficient for primary school pupils and should be complemented by more creative and conscious teaching techniques and activities. However, the teachers' argument that pronunciation is neglected in EFL textbooks can be contradicted by a rather high number of pronunciation exercises detected in each textbook set.

The suprasegmental aspects of the phonic language level are considered more relevant for effective oral communication than the segmental phenomena (Kralova, 2009). Primary school learners in Slovakia are over six years of age which is beyond the "critical" or "sensitive" age for learning foreign language sounds (Flege, 1986). It is thus reasonable to focus on the higher communicative level of foreign language pronunciation and the aspects of connected speech in this age.

The preference of the whole-class form of work with young learners is considered adequate (Euler, 2014). Though older learners are getting more independent and aware of their own and their peers' foreign language competence. They can thus successfully manage different forms of class organisation and learn in individual, pair or group work effectively.

Today, EFL teachers in Slovakia can choose textbooks according to their preferences which is rather difficult in a book market overloaded with various English language textbooks (Reid & Kovacikova, 2017). It is thus hoped that the current study is another small step in this issue as sorting out the right textbook according to teachers' and learners' needs and strategies addressed (Horvathova, 2014) is not an easy choice to make.

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