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English Pronunciation in L2 Instruction

The Case of Secondary School Learners

 Springer

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Introduction

The growing need for global communication worldwide has significantly strengthened the role of English, awarding it the status of international lingua franca. The attempts to introduce an artificial international language for communication (i.e., Esperanto) failed, and thus, English has been given the precedence over any other languages used for international communication. The increasing number of learners worldwide is a relevant factor contributing to the search for better and more efficient teaching practices that would facilitate and boost the learning process. With this aim in mind, researchers and scientists undertake studies and investigations that could lead to a better understanding of the learning process and of language acquisition.

Unquestionably, pronunciation constitutes one of the most relevant aspects of oral communication. The quality and ‘correctness’¹ of pronunciation impact, to a large extent, the intelligibility and comprehensibility of speech. ‘Good’ pronunciation contributes to successful and effective communication. Pronunciation errors may lead to serious breakdowns in communication, more detrimental to its outcome than grammatical or lexical ones. Therefore, teaching pronunciation and the pronunciation learning process are gaining in recognition and can be found among the key issues discussed in second language acquisition (SLA).

In view of the above, pronunciation instruction has been selected as the topic of this monograph. So far much research in the field has concentrated on teaching/learning English as the second language (ESL), i.e. among immigrants in the country where it is spoken. As regards English as a foreign language (EFL), on the other hand, most of the studies focus on English department students and their attitudes towards the pronunciation component of the studies, as well as their beliefs related to pronunciation instruction and practice. However, before they become

¹‘Correctness’ in pronunciation and ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ pronunciation are used here in their pedagogical sense, i.e. with reference to the acceptability defined by the educational system and/or the teacher and based on the teachers’ judgement. With correctness offering a major challenge in the pronunciation assessment, the concept will be further discussed in the dissertation and operationalised in the study (see Chap. 5).

English majors with all the linguistic competence as well as pronunciation and accent awareness, they must come a long way through all the educational levels of primary and secondary schools. It lies within the sphere of my interests to find out what happens before students reach the university. Thus, my intention is to bridge the existing gap in the research studies and to present a tiny fraction of the upper secondary school reality as well as the place and relevance of pronunciation in the school context. The fraction of school reality observed in the empirical research cannot, evidently, be treated as representative of what happens in all schools and of what is characteristic of all learners, but it definitely serves as a constituent contributing to recognising and defining the current situation.

Consequently, a few reasons were conducive to and responsible for the decision to design and conduct the study in the shape reported in this monograph. First and foremost, it is a longitudinal action-research mixed-method study that gives an insight into the needs and expectations of upper secondary school learners and into their perceptions related to pronunciation instruction, as well as progress they made thanks to systematic and structured pronunciation training. It does not mean that there has been no research in this aspect (Wrembel, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, Frankiewicz & Gonet, 2002; Czwenar, 2017; Baran-Łucarz, 2017; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2017), but the studies do not provide yet a comprehensive or exhaustive picture of school learners' views and opinions. Hence, the hope that the present monograph could, as a modest contribution, further add to the picture of secondary school learner cognition and shed some light on the Polish school reality.

Another worthwhile and intriguing question that led to the study design concerns the issue whether it is possible to teach pronunciation during the school work as part of the secondary school syllabus and secondary school teaching system. The study reported here sets out to discover how it could be done, as well as how much of the material could be taught in the school. Since I work as a regular secondary school teacher, I had the opportunity to observe learners in their learning process. In my teaching practice, I regularly attract learners' attention to pronunciation aspects and issues, intertwining them in the lexical or grammatical material presented during regular school work. Consequently, the learners gradually become more sensitive to sounds and prosody aspects, realising that 'good' pronunciation influences communication and reception by interlocutors. Despite the commonly evoked time limitations, course books, which do not offer systematic and well-designed pronunciation work or school national curriculum, which leaves little room for pronunciation instruction, this study is based on the belief that there is a place for pronunciation teaching/learning in the school context.

Thus, the study aims to explore the potential of upper secondary school learners and their readiness and willingness to undertake to study English phonetics and pronunciation. What distinguishes the study from many others is the fact that the learners themselves voiced their pronunciation expectations and devoted their free time to extra pronunciation classes. They wished to gain linguistic and meta-competence that could make them better and more confident speakers of English. Furthermore, they realised communication cannot be successful or effective without 'correct' pronunciation. Such opinions reflect a high degree of

pronunciation awareness as well as goal-setting and self-evaluation abilities of school learners, whose potential might have been so far underestimated and overlooked.

In the light of the above, the study has been designed in order to reveal a relatively comprehensive picture of a group of 'good learners' (Rubin, 1975) in the upper secondary school context. The learners were given a one-year-long course in pronunciation based on their needs' analysis conducted at the beginning of the course. In the middle of the course, they were requested to complete a questionnaire that let them evaluate the course content and self-evaluate their progress, as well as reflect on their further needs and convictions aroused by the participation in the phonetic instruction. What followed then were semi-structured interviews that were meant to clarify and interpret certain points raised by the participants in the survey. During the course, I noted down questions and issues raised as pronunciation problems, which in general suggested that the participants' awareness was growing and developing. Finally, they were provided with the post-course questionnaire, which again attempted to elicit evaluation of the course, self-assessment and the degree of self-fulfilment of the needs. In addition, the learners' reading performance was recorded before and after the course with the aim of comparing and analysing improvements to their pronunciation.

Such a multi-layered design of the study guarantees that, on the one hand, it may contribute to the worldwide debate on pronunciation teaching and learning, pronunciation acquisition and learner needs, thus enriching and adding to the wealth of studies and investigations conducted by researchers and educators in the field of pronunciation instruction. It may also, on the other hand, become a source of inspiration for other practitioners and teachers of English, who, hopefully, will appreciate it as useful in their own teaching practices and will feel persuaded to adopt a more positive attitude towards pronunciation instruction and to start believing pronunciation teaching is feasible and necessary. Rearranging and restructuring the teaching process so as to include pronunciation practice is advocated here as the right direction for the future.

This monograph consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 concentrates on the place of pronunciation instruction in the teaching of English. It begins with an overview of pronunciation teaching history. Therefore, it focuses on different approaches to pronunciation teaching in different methodologies until the moment the communicative approach took over and started to dominate the teaching/learning process. Then, the chapter proceeds with a discussion of current dilemmas and controversies in modern methodology. It will analyse key concepts such as nativeness, comfortable intelligibility, comprehensibility, accuracy and fluency. It will also present views on which target accent models are advocated in teaching practices and whether native speakers are better teachers than non-native ones. Finally, the chapter will present a discussion on which aspects of pronunciation, segments or prosody lead to better comprehension and how they are conducive to successful communication.

Chapter 2 is divided into three sections. The first one reviews techniques and tools used in pronunciation teaching now and in the past. It refers to a number of

different taxonomies and categories of techniques presented by researchers, as well as studies that investigate their efficacy and efficiency for learners. The second section of the chapter scrutinises available pronunciation teaching resources, thus evoking a few analyses that reviewed the available resource materials and investigating some that were not included in the studies. Further, the chapter proceeds to the third section, which presents an overview of several studies that undertook to analyse and evaluate the pronunciation component in a number of English all-skills course books. Thus, while Chap. 1 is more theoretical in its nature and introduces the vast field of pronunciation instruction with all its queries and pondering issues, Chap. 2 investigates the practical resources and techniques that are at English (pronunciation) teachers' disposal.

Consequently, it seems natural to move on to what teachers think about pronunciation instruction and what the students' attitudes to learning pronunciation are. These two points of view are presented in Chap. 3, which evokes interesting studies on teacher cognition and learner attitudes. It also attempts to give an insight into several variables that condition and impact the process of pronunciation acquisition (capable either of boosting or impeding it), and many a time fall beyond the teacher's or even the learner's control. Pronunciation teaching lies in the hands of the teachers and educators, but their determination, devotion and cognizance will not contribute to learners' success, if learners themselves do not wish to acquire it, or if there are some objective obstacles on their way.

Chapter 4 gives an outline of the methodology of the longitudinal action-research study and comprises two sections. The first one presents guidelines for the course design as well as the relevant background to grasp the secondary school reality and assessment criteria and variables taken into consideration while evaluating learners' speech. The second section discusses the goals and motivation for the study and poses four research questions. It also describes the course content, the participants and the mixed method employed in the study, meant to provide unbiased and verifiable data for the analysis.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the study for each of the six applied instruments. Consequently, the results are analysed with reference to the four research questions, and they are, furthermore, discussed with reference to the major concepts and research findings in the field reported in the first three chapters.

Organised in this way, the monograph leads to the Conclusion that sums up the results and the discussion and provides directions for further research and major pedagogical implications for the future. It is hoped the publication can make a meaningful contribution to the literature in the pronunciation instruction field and to provide inspiration as well as practical guidance to English (pronunciation) teachers.