

Allotted Time and Ways for Teaching Pronunciation at Lower-secondary School Levels in Slovakia

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Abstract

This study is concerned with the process of teaching and learning pronunciation. It aims to determine to what extent pronunciation is taught at a lower secondary school level in Slovakia. 15 lessons were observed with the focus on how much time and what ways are devoted to teaching pronunciation. Afterwards, a questionnaire was distributed to both the students and the teachers in order to find out what importance they attach to pronunciation teaching. Ultimately, relevant conclusions are drawn and constructive suggestions are provided.

Keywords: Pronunciation, L2 learners, Time

Introduction

Learning English has become an essential part of today's modern world. Despite the fact that certain people consider learning vocabulary and grammar as sufficient, others wish to speak fluently and they desire to be clearly understood. As far as systems are concerned, it appears that pronunciation has become an overlooked area in the English language teaching. However, L2 learners need to remember that poor pronunciation may lead to major communication breakdowns and thus pronunciation as such should never be underestimated by neither teachers nor learners.

Allotted time to teaching pronunciation

Taking the time factor into account, it seems that there are various alternatives to when to include pronunciation teaching into lessons. For instance, it can be *whole lessons sequences* devoted to pronunciation practice. That does not necessarily mean that every minute is spent on pronunciation work only; students may, for example, work on some vocabulary aspects before working on spelling, word stress and sounds. Similarly, listening skills can be practiced before the pronunciation sequence. Another possibility is *discrete slots*. These are separate short bits of pronunciation work inserted into a lesson sequence. *Separate slots* can be also useful since they provide space for the change of pace. However, students may also need pronunciation work integrated into longer lesson sequences because pronunciation should not be regarded as a separate system. It is an inseparable aspect of how people speak (Harmer, 2001; Gondová, 2012).

Another ways with regard to pronunciation teaching include *integrated phases*. For example, students' attention during listening is drawn to a certain feature or sounds, or to imitating certain intonation patterns. Next option is represented by *opportunistic teaching* which takes place when teachers stray from the original plan and teach vocabulary or grammar in an opportunistic way since it has "come into being". Thus, there are relevant reasons why teachers may want to stop what they are working on and devote some time to the pronunciation issue that has come up during the teaching process. Despite the fact that whole pronunciation lessons are not always possible due to

the syllabus and timetable pressure, teachers usually use a mixture of the previously mentioned ways (Harmer, 2001; Sárosdy et al, 2006).

Laroy (1996) suggests that pronunciation should always be at the back of teacher's mind and that it cannot be overlooked although, according to Bírová (2013), it can be assumed that more positive transfer from L1 to L2 can be normally found as far as the acquisition of pronunciation and grammar are concerned. However, English pronunciation is significantly different from the Slovak pronunciation. Thus, it appears that pronunciation ought to be always included at some points during the teaching process. Moreover, Kráľová (2010) indicates that attention needs to be directed not only to segmentals, but also to suprasegmental features since they also play a major role in communication.

Ways of teaching pronunciation

The process of teaching pronunciation, comparable to teaching vocabulary or grammar, consists of these stages: exposure – when learners listen to samples of pronunciation, understanding and noticing – when learners' attention is drawn to the clarification of rules and target patterns and, finally, production (Gondová, 2012).

Pronunciation can be taught in various ways. Activities which can be used for teaching pronunciation include drills – are repetition of sentences or words in chorus, minimal pairs or minimal pair pictures in which one feature that words differ in is paid attention to such as sheep and ship. Another activity is identifying a different word in a list of three or four words with the same vowel or consonant cluster. The task is to find the word with similar but not the same sound and it is called *odd one out*. Students can also be asked to say how many times they have heard a certain sound in a sentence; this task is called *How many times?*. They can also be asked to count the syllables of a problematic word. Another activity involves using songs so that students are familiar with rhythm and word stress. Jazz chants, tales and drama can be also used to practice intonation, word stress and rhythm, especially with children. In addition, shadow reading tasks can be used to practice intonation and pronunciation (Scrivener, 2011; Gondová, 2012).

Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) introduce the following techniques. *Listen and imitate* – recordings are used, then *phonetic training* – phonetic transcriptions, articulatory diagrams and the phonetic alphabet are used, *minimal-pair drills*, *visual aids* such as pictures or realia, which can be used for practicing the target sounds. Another technique used with intermediate or advanced learners is *practicing the stress shifts and vowel shifts* in which the rule-based nature of stress is paid attention to. *Recitation* and *reading aloud* can be also used as a pronunciation practice activity too.

There exist various types of tasks which can be used for pronunciation instruction. It seems reasonable to assume that English teachers can fulfil students' pronunciation needs only through familiarity with a number of techniques and detailed knowledge of the sound system.

Objective of the study

The study examines teaching pronunciation at a lower secondary school level in Slovakia. Time and ways in terms of pronunciation instruction are at the centre of attention. Finally, attention is directed to what importance teachers and learners attach to pronunciation instruction.

Research questions

Q1: How much time do teachers devote to teaching pronunciation?

Q2: Which ways do teachers use when teaching pronunciation?

Q3: Do the learners/teachers consider pronunciation teaching important?

Q4: Do the learners/teachers think that there is enough time allotted to teaching pronunciation?

Methodology

Participants

The observation took place at ISCED 2 level – 64 students (both boys and girls) aged 12 - 15 years. 11 teachers (both males and females) consisted of various age groups.

Instruments

Fifteen regular English lessons at a lower secondary school in Žilina were observed. Thus, the observation method was applied.

Another method used involved a questionnaire which was developed and distributed in order to examine what importance is pronunciation teaching attached. Furthermore, two extra questions concerning English native speakers and native-like accent were included in the questionnaire.

Results

Results of observation

Table 1. Results related to observation

Class	Time	Ways
1	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
2	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
3	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
4	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
5	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
6 L	3 min	Opportunistic teaching
7 L	3 min	Opportunistic teaching
8	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
9	1 min	Integrated phases
10	2 min	Integrated phases
11	2 min	Opportunistic teaching
12	20 min	Integrated phases
13	3 min	Integrated phases
14	3 min	Integrated phases
15	3 min	Integrated phases

The observation table demonstrates that the average time allotted to teaching pronunciation was 3.5 minutes per one lesson.

Next feature we focused on in the observation was to establish which ways of teaching pronunciation teachers use. The most frequently used way of teaching pronunciation was *opportunistic teaching*. In most cases, the teachers seemed to have only corrected mistakes when they took place. Self-correction or peer-correction did not take place. No delayed feedback on pronunciation errors was detected either.

Another way of teaching pronunciation was *integrated phases*. After the observation, one teacher indicated that it is important to emphasize the sounds that are likely to cause problems for Slovak learners of English such as *schwa* and *th-* sounds. By drawing learners' attention to these problematic sounds which do not have equivalents in Slovak, there is a greater tendency that the learners will pronounce them more appropriately.

Our results show that each observed lesson involved at least some pronunciation teaching (opportunistic teaching being the most dominant way). Therefore, a lesson in which pronunciation would not be taught at all did not take place during the observation.

Results of questionnaire

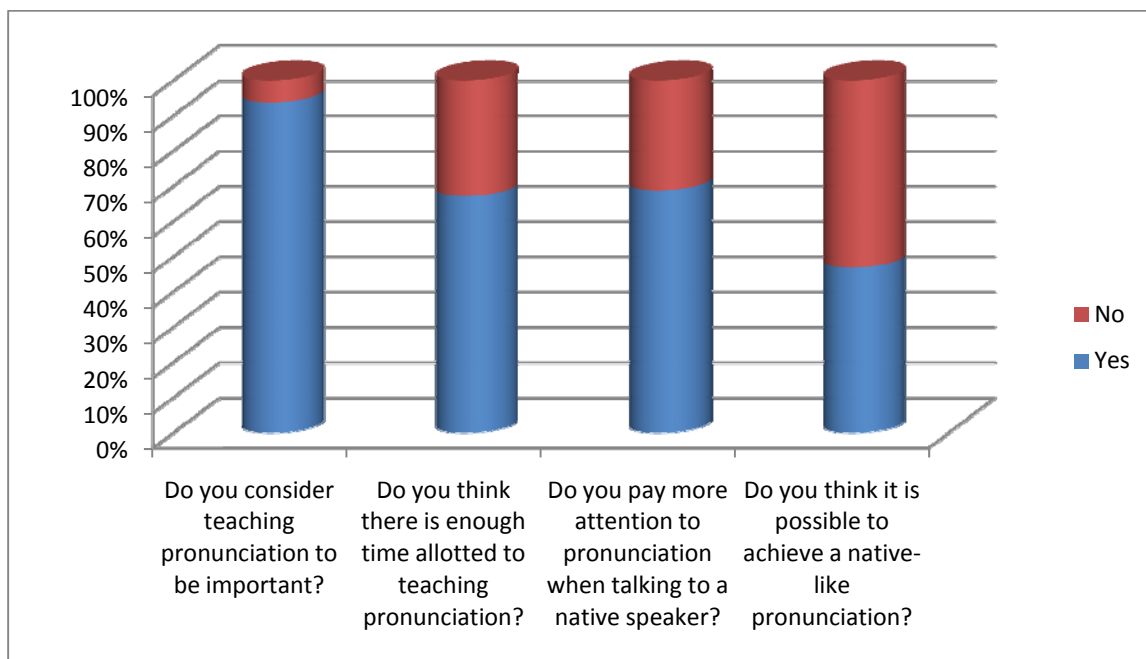


Figure 1. Questionnaire completed by the learners

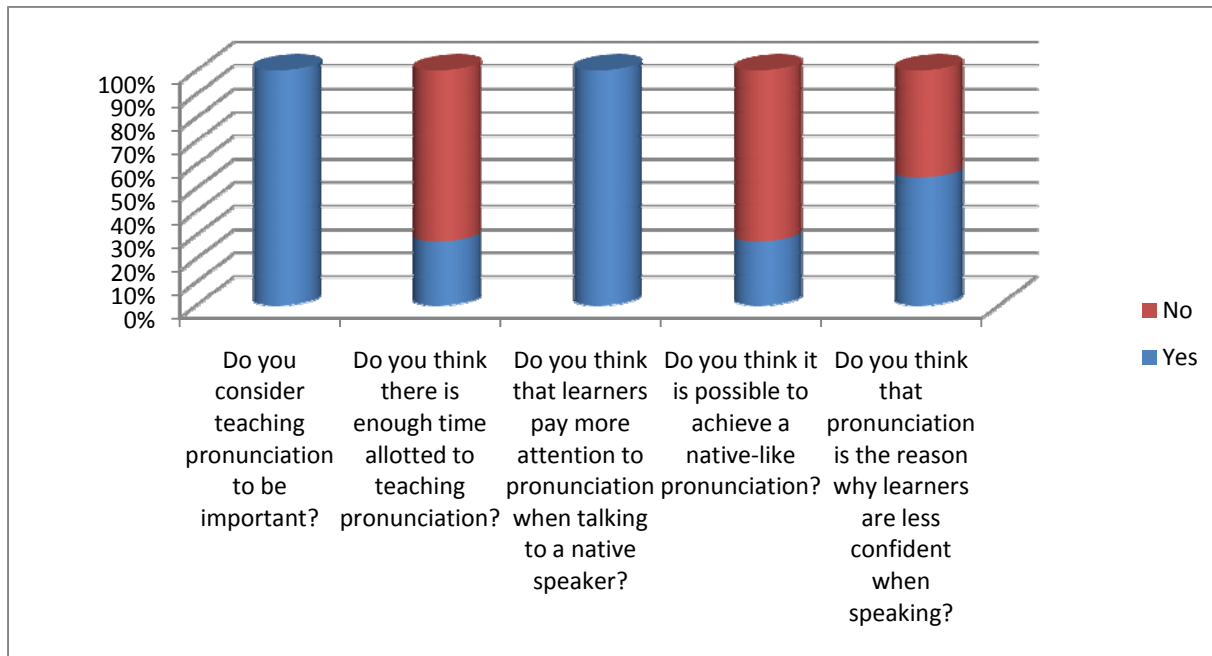


Figure 2. Questionnaire completed by the teachers

Figure 1 offers data gathered from 64 students. 94% of learners regard teaching pronunciation as an important aspect of teaching English. Approximately two thirds of the subjects think that there actually is enough time devoted to pronunciation teaching. Roughly 69% pay more

attention to pronunciation when they have a conversation with an English native speaker and only 47% agree that achieving a native-like accent is plausible.

Figure 2 provides the data obtained from 11 teachers. Clearly, all the teachers consider teaching pronunciation important. As far as the allotted time is concerned, it seems that even though teachers would like to pay more attention to teaching pronunciation, there really is not enough time left for this aspect of language as 73% of the teachers claim they do not have sufficient amount of time at their disposal. Every teacher thinks that L2 learners of English pay more attention to pronunciation when they are engaged in a conversation with an English native speaker. 27% of teachers think that attaining a native-like accent is not possible, and 55% of the teachers claim that pronunciation is the reason why L2 learners might be less confident when speaking.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study yielded interesting results. The observation of the subjects shows that on average, 3.5 minutes per lesson is dedicated to teaching pronunciation. It would be perhaps unfair and rather difficult to judge the average amount of time. However, it seems reasonable to assume that more ways of pronunciation instruction ought to be employed and that *opportunistic teaching* (recognized in 9 of 15 lessons) might not suffice. *Integrated phases* was identified within 6 observed lessons, which could be regarded as satisfactory.

As far as the data obtained from the questionnaires are concerned, it is obvious that the vast majority of students and all the teachers deem teaching pronunciation important. This could be considered a positive indication in terms of teaching English as a foreign language for both the students and the teachers.

Taking the devoted time into account, roughly two thirds of the students think that there is enough time for pronunciation teaching. However, only 27% of the teachers do actually think that there really is ample time for including pronunciation into the teaching process. Examining English pronunciation and the differences between the Slovak and English sound system more closely, it is reasonable to assume that more time spent on developing pronunciation would perhaps prove more useful and beneficial. Undoubtedly, meeting the syllabus requirements along with the development of other systems and skills need to be taken into account too.

Approximately 69% of the students and 100% of the teachers think that Slovak learners of English indeed pay attention to their pronunciation when holding a conversation with English native speakers. This is a rather interesting finding and it is possible that L2 learners generally feel more sensitive about their pronunciation when talking to the native speakers of English.

47% of learners and 27% of teachers hold an opinion that attaining a native-like accent is plausible. It appears that learners' opinion is quite overrated since ample research indicates that only few learners are capable of achieving pronunciation comparable to that of an English native speaker.

Teachers' questionnaire contained one more question which involved the degree of confidence in connection with pronunciation of L2 English learners. 55% of teachers think that pronunciation might be a factor when it comes to speaking and confidence. This may be actually true since pronunciation is the first thing other people notice. Thus, the factor of inhibition and the fear of inappropriate pronunciation need to be taken into consideration too.

The study findings suggest that pronunciation is deemed important by both teachers and learners and that it is taught to a certain degree. However, more time spent on pronunciation activities would probably prove more useful to the learners. Likewise, employing more ways might deliver greater benefits too. It is also vital to mention that other variables might have influenced the study and that further research will cast more light on the issue of pronunciation teaching.

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