

PRESENTATION/POSTER

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS' PRONUNCIATION NEEDS, PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

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A longitudinal action-research study was conducted in a secondary school context. It aimed to explore learners' pronunciation needs and to assess the impact of 30 weeks of pronunciation instruction on learners' perceived phonetic competence, awareness and self-confidence. The results suggest that this group of learners can display a considerable degree of linguistic awareness, which they felt was developed through the course of instruction. Although the instructed pronunciation training focused mainly on segmental features, it contributed to the learners' convictions that they improved their pronunciation and became more conscious speakers.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation constitutes a significant aspect of oral communication. One of the most relevant issues in the field of pronunciation instruction is the dichotomy between nativeness and comfortable intelligibility as learning goals stressed by Levis (2005). With the dominance of the Communicative Approach, the nativeness principle seems to have been abandoned for the sake of intelligibility. Derwing and Munro (2015) explain the terms intelligibility (comprehension) and comprehensibility (effort put into understanding) and their lack of correlation with accentedness (the degree of L1 accent in L2 speech). Another dilemma in the current research on pronunciation instruction is the relationship between accuracy, fluency and proficiency in the language. Accuracy is most frequently identified with segmental correctness and the degree of approximation to the model phonemic category (Waniek-Klimczak, 2018). Fluency of speech, on the other hand, refers to widely-understood suprasegmental phonetic features such as rhythm, stress or intonation, whereas the linguistic proficiency in its broadest meaning refers to the organisation of speech on all levels (i.e., both segmental and suprasegmental; Waniek-Klimczak, 2003). Derwing and Munro (2015) characterise fluency as fluidity which is "the degree to which speech flows easily without pauses and other dysfluency markers" (p. 5). Even though the terms proficiency and fluency are sometimes used interchangeably, Derwing and Munro (2015) identify proficiency as the highest level of fluency distinguished by creative use of the language (Fillmore, 1979).

To date, much research in the field has concentrated on teaching and learning English as second language (ESL) (Derwing, Diepenbroek, & Foote, 2012; Derwing & Munro, 2011; Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2007). With regard to English as foreign language (EFL), many studies conducted in Poland focus on university-level students of English and their attitudes towards pronunciation instruction (Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2015; Sobkowiak, 2002; Waniek-Klimczak, 2013; Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk, & Porzuczek, 2015). Huensch and Thompson (2017) report that a relatively small number of studies concentrate on the attitudes of learners toward pronunciation in an FL context (their study focuses on adult American-university FL learners' pronunciation attitudes). In Europe, Smit and Dalton (2000) and Smit (2002)

investigated motivations and self-efficacy of adult German EFL learners. Sardegna, Lee, and Kusey (2014, 2018) undertook to explore the motivations and beliefs regarding English pronunciation of adolescent Korean learners. Using the LAMP Inventory (Learner Attitudes and Motivations for Pronunciation five-point Likert-scale survey), the authors found that the learners exhibited a low degree of cognitive, conative and self-efficacy attitudes towards learning English phonology (2014), and that higher self-efficacy affected positively pronunciation skills and strategy use (2018). As was observed by Sardegna, Lee, and Kusey (2014), the research dedicated to motivation and perceptions of young adult learners, however, is scarce in the European EFL contexts and the field needs further exploration and investigation given that there is a growing demand for global communication which relies largely on oral skills, such as accuracy and fluency of speech. Another important reason for selecting younger learners is that they are generally considered more successful at FL pronunciation learning than adults (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Therefore, it seems reasonable to claim that a population in need of additional study are secondary school students learning English as a foreign language. This group is limited in their exposure to the foreign language (they learn English in Poland and the use of external widely-available materials depends on their choice and will) and they are usually not far enough along in their educational pursuits that they have decided on a career choice. This study, therefore, aims to bridge the existing gap in the literature by describing a longitudinal action research project which occurred with secondary school students aged 17 and 18 who received a year of weekly pronunciation instruction.

The current study

The pronunciation instruction comprised 30 lessons (45 minutes each) of phonetic training as an extracurricular course for 10 self-selected participants. The course design reflected pronunciation syllabi guidelines outlined in literature concerning the functional load principle (Catford, 1987), setting realistic and attainable goals (Morley, 1994; Scheuer, 2015), or the cyclical nature of curriculum development (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Furthermore, studies conducted in the Polish context indicate specific areas of difficulty for Polish learners of English, such as aspiration, distinction between long/short vowels, velarized /l/, dental fricatives, velar nasal, unstressed syllable/vowel reduction, rhythm, stress timing and linking (Porzuczek, Rojczyk, & Arabski, 2013; Rojczyk & Porzuczek, 2012; Szpyra-Kozłowska et al., 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2005; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015; Wells, 2005). Dental fricatives are usually of interest to Polish learners since they do not occur in the Polish sound inventory. Even though they do not affect intelligibility (low functional load), they are salient features of English phonetics and their mispronunciations are frequently perceived as irritating (Scheuer, 2003). In view of the above-mentioned research, the aspects selected for the pronunciation training comprised mainly segmentals (long/short vowel contrast, schwa /ə/ and trap vowel /æ/, aspiration, pre-fortis clipping, final devoicing, dental fricatives /θ ð/, velar nasal /ŋ/) as well as selected suprasegmentals such as rhythm, stress, weak forms and linking. The dominance of segmental phonetics in the pronunciation course resulted from the needs indicated by the participants themselves in their pre-course questionnaires. The range of techniques and training methods involved both the traditional 'listen and repeat' tasks, minimal pairs practice, word-level accuracy targeting word stress and single sounds, homophones (which were often pronounced differently) reading out loud and acting out dialogues, as well as tongue twisters, pronunciation jokes and games like 'bingo' or 'hangman' and the use of pronunciation smartphone applications (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Kelly, 2000). Explicit

pronunciation instruction was provided with the use of metalanguage, gradually introduced during the course.

Research questions

The study explores secondary school learners' needs and attitudes with regard to features of pronunciation and observes the development of pronunciation awareness and speaking confidence resulting from an extended period of pronunciation instruction. The motivation for the study stemmed from long-term observations of English teaching in the Polish state institution context (which point to inadequacy or lack of pronunciation instruction) as well as conviction that pronunciation constitutes a vital factor affecting speech (Pawlak et al., 2015; Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005) and a linguistic skill that merits SLA attention (Gilbert, 2010; Grant, 2014). Furthermore, it was surmised that secondary school learners realise that pronunciation is an essential element of language learning (Baker, 1992; Szyszka, 2015; Tergujeff, 2013). In addition, contrary to coursebooks' authors, it seemed reasonable to expect advanced, relatively fluent and conscious speakers of English to wish to improve their accuracy so as to sound more native-like rather than phonologically simplified (e.g., Jenkins' LFC, 2000). Consequently, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What do secondary school EFL learners perceive their pronunciation needs to be?

RQ2: Does regular pronunciation instruction lead to attitude changes regarding pronunciation awareness, speaking confidence, and perceived performance enhancement?

METHODS

Participants

The participant group included ten learners aged 17-18, two males and eight females in their second year, who chose an extended-level English course (seven hours of English weekly), plus the additional hour of phonetic instruction. They were all fluent from B1 (intermediate) to B2+ (advanced intermediate) according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The participants had clearly-set learning goals and future plans. Seven of them wanted to pursue a career in a medicine-related field, three in journalism, but none planned to study English. All exhibited a considerably high degree of linguistic awareness since they volunteered for the course, voiced what they felt their pronunciation needs and deficiencies were and wished to achieve satisfaction with their speech while reducing speaking anxiety. They emphasised the desire to acquire more confidence in out-of-class interactions with both native and non-native speakers.

Instruments

This study employed three questionnaires (open-ended pre-, open-ended mid- and Likert-scale post-course), interviews, observations and pre- and post-course speech assessment of *Please call Stella* (speecharchive.gmu.edu). The article will focus on detailed results of the pre- and post-course questionnaires.

The pre-course questionnaire asked the participants to share their opinions and beliefs on five areas: their English background, how they understood the term 'correct' pronunciation, their preferred accent model, the importance of pronunciation in foreign language learning and their pronunciation goals and needs. The end-course questionnaire contained 25 statements on a 6-point Likert scale, where 6 meant definitely agree and 1 meant definitely disagree, with space for additional comments. It aimed to elicit the learners' reflections and their evaluation of perceived development as well as efficacy and practicality of the course. The questionnaires differed in form and scope since they were intended to serve a different purpose: in the first one the participants expressed general opinions and needs whereas in the other (more detailed and more metalinguistic in its nature) they evaluated the course and the knowledge acquired. Both were anonymous and both were administered in Polish. The data analysis procedure for the pre-course questionnaire consists in reporting all response patterns (with the number in brackets representing the frequency of comments), though not all 10 participants responded to all sections. The results of the post-course questionnaire are presented with the mean value and standard deviation for each statement. Additional comments made by some participants are presented as well.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Pre-course questionnaire

All participants started learning English in kindergarten and later they all attended different extra-curricular English courses, 4 in the primary school and 6 in the junior secondary school. However, none of them attended extra English instruction outside the upper secondary context. In their attempts to define correct pronunciation, they mentioned: correct articulation of sounds (n=1), correct word stress (n=1), care in pronouncing words (n=1), accuracy (n=3), native-like speech (n=4) and fluency (n=4). As for their preferred accent variant, three pointed to British English and one to American English. As regards the relevance of pronunciation, they highlighted the communicative aspect of speech and the dominant role of pronunciation (n=2) as well as pronunciation as the most important subsystem of language (n=2). Some of them also asserted that pronunciation errors may lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations (n=3). The questionnaire shed light on the participants' perceived needs, as follows:

- intelligibility in English-speaking countries (n=1)
- native-like pronunciation and not being recognized as a non-native speaker (n=1)
- acquiring correct pronunciation (n=1)
- reducing their Polish accent while speaking English (n=3)
- fluency in speech (n=4)
- word and sentence stress (n=4)
- accuracy (n=4)

Both fluency and accuracy were indicated as main goals by four (different) learners. When mentioning accuracy, the participants stressed the need to produce sounds accurately, especially English sounds that do not exist in the Polish sound inventory. Only one person evoked intelligibility ('being understood') as the communication objective, whereas four pointed to accent-free or native-like pronunciation ('speaking like natives') as their aim.

Post-course questionnaire

Table 1 presents the questionnaire and results by providing mean value and standard deviation for each statement/question.

Table 1.

The mean and SD values for the end-course questionnaire

Statements	Mean value	Standard deviation
1. I consider the additional English phonetics classes useful.	5.6	0.66
2. I observe improvements to my pronunciation.	4.9	0.53
3. My pronunciation awareness is raised now.	5.6	0.48
4. I pay attention to correct pronunciation while I speak.	5.4	0.48
5. Correct pronunciation is crucial when we speak a foreign language.	5.8	0.40
6. I like to repeat out loud words with difficult sounds.	4.9	1.30
7. I regard phonetic transcription as necessary.	4.7	1.48
8. Knowing phonetic transcription helps read new words in a good way.	5.1	0.94
9. The aspects of connected speech presented during the course were new for me.	4.2	0.97
10. The awareness of connected speech processes is useful when we learn English.	5.0	0.63
11. Word stress is essential for correct pronunciation.	4.8	0.60
12. Sentence stress is essential for correct pronunciation.	4.8	0.74
13. Pronunciation of 'th' was difficult for me.	4.0	1.34
14. Pronunciation of 'th' is now easy.	4.5	0.67
15. I had problems with the velar nasal sound.	3.5	1.36
16. I can pronounce the velar nasal now.	4.8	0.74
17. English vowels are difficult to pronounce.	3.5	1.20
18. I am more aware of the English vowels now.	5.0	0.63
19. Pronunciation of 'ash' was difficult for me (9 answers only).	3.7	1.44
20. Pronunciation of 'ash' is now easier (9 answers only).	4.8	1.08

21. I was not aware that voicing at the end of words is indicated by the preceding vowel length.	4.7	1.26
22. I have learnt that schwa is the shortest vowel in English.	5.0	0.89
23. Did the additional phonetics course help you learn English?	5.5	0.50
24. Would you like to continue the pronunciation course next year?	5.4	0.66
25. Is phonetics relevant in foreign language learning?	5.6	0.48

As can be observed in Table 1, the first five statements reflect the participants' perceptions regarding their self-awareness of pronunciation and the role pronunciation fulfils in the learning process and in speech. Relatively low values of SD (in statements 1-5) indicate that most of the participants' answers varied between the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' options. Statements 6, 7 and 8 referred to the strategies employed while learning pronunciation, i.e. repetition and phonetic transcription. The highest value of SD in statement 7 was caused by one 'definitely disagree' answer. The next fourteen statements denote the progress as perceived by the learners themselves. They all claimed to have mastered pronunciation of difficult segments. Interestingly, there is a discrepancy between the learners' self-beliefs about their progress and their actual performance. Despite their assertions, the recordings' data analysis demonstrates that erroneous pronunciation still occurred. The participants also agreed that word stress, sentence stress and connected speech are essential for pronunciation and contribute to enhanced communicativeness. The results of the last three questions suggest that the participants regarded phonetic training as relevant in foreign language learning in general. They unanimously volunteered to participate in the course continuation next year, which may support the conclusion that their raised awareness stimulated them to wish to learn more.

Seven participants provided additional comments listed below:

- *I like the fact that we speak a lot, even though my results are not always the best. I find it much easier now to speak English in general.*
- *It is difficult to say whether my pronunciation has improved but, definitely, I am more aware of phonetics and I pay more attention to how I pronounce words.*
- *I want to learn more 'correct pronunciation' and more transcription.*
- *I want to pronounce words accurately.*
- *I would like to learn reading from transcription.*
- *I need more everyday fast speech practice.*
- *Now I really pay attention to how I pronounce words.*

These reflections lead to a tentative conclusion that perceptually the course made the participants more sensitive to various aspects of pronunciation thus rendering their speech more controlled and less accidental. It seems they knew what they wanted to improve and work on in the future in order to reach their goals, even though in the Likert-scale they claimed progress in segmental features.

DISCUSSION

In regards to the research questions, the analysis of the learners' needs and expectations proved a relatively high degree of linguistic and phonetic awareness. The study was conducted in response to the popular demand of the learners, who had voiced their needs in the field of pronunciation. They realised pronunciation is crucial in language learning, especially in the light of its communicative function. The participants assessed their capacity and pinpointed their weaknesses and the areas that needed further improvement. With clearly-set needs and expectations, they lacked, however, the requisite metalanguage to explicitly elaborate on them. Apart from fluency, they mentioned accurate articulation of English sounds as their goal, which demonstrates dissatisfaction with their oral production and aspirations for overall correctness and not just rough approximation to the target model. The results of the post-course questionnaire clearly suggest the participants' growing and developing awareness of pronunciation, pronunciation strategies' application and metalinguistic competence.

Furthermore, in their comments, the learners reported becoming more sensitive to speech and its conscious monitoring. They realised they had been equipped with necessary tools leading to the enhancement of their speaking and communication efficacy and the metalinguistic knowledge required to express their needs. While the outcome might not be surprising, it undoubtedly strengthens the argument that pronunciation must be taught and learners wish to learn it.

It can be inferred that secondary school learners have the potential to develop increased phonetic awareness and this potential should not be neglected. Thus, learner needs should be analysed and accounted for in language syllabi. Moreover, contrary to common beliefs of coursebooks' authors, language proficiency increases sensitivity to the accuracy of speech. Therefore, segmental pronunciation practice should not be relegated from the upper- and higher levels; it could be offered parallelly with suprasegmental features. Polish students, similarly to others in Europe (Tergujeff, 2013), realise that too little time is devoted to phonetic instruction in school. Pronunciation should be taught at all educational stages to avoid fossilisation of errors (Baker, 1992).

Regular and planned phonetic training (albeit not very intensive and devoted mainly to segments) exerts a positive influence on the participants' perceptions and self-beliefs regarding their own speech. The data (statement 5) comply with the hypothesis that pronunciation is a relevant factor affecting speech and communication efficacy (Pawlak et al., 2015; Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005). Furthermore, contrary to Gimson (1970) and Jenkins (2000) phonological simplifications do not necessarily constitute the learners' ultimate goal. Some of them firmly believe that the beauty of the language lies in its unique pronunciation features.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it bears pointing out that the ten participants, despite different interests, varied levels of advancement and school grades, had one common feature, namely their wish to master English pronunciation accurately, which resulted in high attendance and eagerness to dedicate their free time and as a result contributed to the success of the study. Given the limited scope of research

concerning state school context, the project has certain important pedagogical implications in that students wish to improve their pronunciation and perceive it as a crucial factor in communication.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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