The Influence of Sociological Factors on Teaching English Phonetics in Polish Lower and Upper Secondary Schools

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to analyse a few sociological factors which may exert influence on the secondary school EFL teachers’ decisions whether to teach or not to teach English pronunciation to their students. A group of English teachers from various areas of Poland participated in the research. The factors which were analysed included sex, age, place of living, place of work, as well as education background. The results have shown that there is a high probability that some of those factors may be supremely important for the analysed topic.

Keywords: sociological factors, teaching pronunciation, English as a foreign language
1. Introduction

The acquisition of correct pronunciation is one of the most crucial elements of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). What makes L2 phonetics and phonology completely different than other language subsystems, is their purely physical nature. This automatically means that they are extremely difficult to language learners who are frequently characterized by a “foreign accent”, even at quite advanced level of language proficiency. The articulation of particular sounds is the final manifestation of all mental processes which take place during planning and creating an utterance. It requires neural stimulation of the articulators which need to perform a whole set of movements leading to the production of vowels, consonants, word and sentence stress, as well as intonation (Rojczyk and Porzuczek, 2012).

So it can be stated that successful acquisition of L2 pronunciation requires learning numerous new elements of a language, such as sounds, stress and intonation. In order to achieve it, language learners have to be trained in both production and perception of speech (e.g. Porzuczek and Rojczyk, 2010), especially since sound systems of various languages differ acoustically to a great extent (e.g. Rojczyk, 2010). Students willing to learn correct pronunciation have to change their habits connected with their former experience with their mother tongue and concentrate on those features which were previously ignored by them or were of secondary importance (Francis and Nusbaum, 2002; Guion and Pederson, 2007; Escudero et al., 2009). As this process is long, complex and complicated, the help of a professional language teacher cannot be overestimated here (Komorowska, 2011).

2. To Teach or not to Teach?

As Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) notices, there is no successful verbal communication without correct pronunciation. Correct articulation enables communication with both native and non-native users of a particular language, as well as language learners from all over the world (np. Littlewood, 1994; Setter and Jenkins, 2005). Numerous studies have shown that phonetic training improves language learners’ pronunciation and communication skills in a foreign/second language (np. Derwing and Munro, 2005; Saito, 2012; Lipińska, 2013; Tergujeff, 2013).

Unfortunately, even though the necessity to teach phonetics seems to be obvious, pronunciation is still neglected in teaching programmes at lower levels than the academic one (np. Lintunen and Mäkilähde, 2015). Numerous studies carried out in Poland since the early 1990s until now (np. Majer, 2002; Porzuczek, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, Frankiewicz and Gonet, 2002; Nowacka, 2003; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2003; Waniek-Klimczak and Dłutek, 2003; Wysocka, 2003; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008; Lipińska, 2014) have shown that, first of all, phonetics is virtually not taught during L2 classes at Polish schools, secondly, it has a low status in foreign language teachers’ eyes, and moreover students are very critical concerning their teachers’ pronunciation in an L2.

However, how can one wave it aside in the situation when incorrect pronunciation may lead not only to funny misunderstandings, but also to a communication
breakdown (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015), breaking off negotiations (Duong Thi Nu, 2015; Ha Cam Tam, 2005) and even airplane accidents (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015)? How can one overcome aversion displayed by some native speakers of a particular language who are very sensitive about correct pronunciation in their mother tongue (np. Fries and Deprez, 2003; Kotuła, 2015)? The only possible solution to those problems seems to consist in a long-term and intensive phonetic training aiming at approximating language learners’ pronunciation to the correct, native-like one. It seems that the role of foreign language teachers is vital in this process. And even though there are few studies which show that foreign language teachers find L2 pronunciation important, a vast majority of studies suggest something just the opposite. As Baran-Łucarz (2006) discovers in her study, a lot of language teachers are able to find surprisingly many reasons for not teaching phonetics at all, ranging from the alleged lack of materials and resources available to the supposed unwillingness of L2 learners to pronunciation classes. Czajka and Lipińska’s (2013) study shows that numerous teachers feel incompetent in this area and thus unprepared to teach foreign pronunciation.

3. Current Study

The aim of this study was to analyse sociological factors which may influence foreign language teachers’ decisions concerning teaching (or not) English pronunciation in lower- and upper-secondary schools in Poland. 81 teachers of English as a foreign/second language participated in the study. There were 44 female teachers and 37 male teachers who came from various areas of Poland. They completed an anonymous online questionnaire, specially designed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was uploaded onto an Internet platform in order to recruit as many informants as possible. The gathered data was subsequently subjected to descriptive and statistical analysis. The statistical analysis was done with the use of one-way ANOVA (it was assumed that the result was significant at \( p < .05 \)).

3.1 Sex

The teachers’ sex was the first of all the analysed factors. The answers provided by the study participants proved that about 30% of male teachers and about 34% of female teachers decide to train their students in English phonetics. The results seem to be quite similar for both groups of subjects, also when one looks at the statistical analysis. A one-way ANOVA showed that \( p = 0.635 \), which means that the statistical difference is not significant.
3.2 Place of Living

The teachers’ place of living was another factor which was in the centre of attention of this study. The study results have shown that barely 23.3% of the language teachers who live in the countryside decide to teach English pronunciation to their students. In the case of the teachers from the city/town this number is much higher and equals 47%. Also the statistical analysis has proven the significance of the difference between the groups (p= 0.031).
3.3 Place of Work

A further factor analysed in this piece of research was connected with the study participants’ place of work. They were divided into two groups – those who work in village schools and those who work in schools situated in towns or cities. The data acquired from the questionnaire showed that 31% of the teachers who work in villages and 44% of those teachers who work in cities decide to teach English pronunciation during EFL classes. The statistical analysis revealed that the p-value equaled 0.103. It means that the result is not statistically significant, however it must be more influential that the teachers’ sex.

![Figure 3](image)

*The influence of the place of work on teaching English pronunciation*

3.4 Age

The teachers’ age was the fourth of the analysed sociological factors. The study participants were divided into three age groups: 25-35 years old, 36-45 years old and finally >45 years old. The data obtained from the online questionnaire revealed that 37% of the members of the youngest group do teach English pronunciation at their work. At the same time 33.33% of the subjects who are between 36 and 45 years old decide to teach L2 phonetics and only 11.11% of the oldest teachers do it. It can be easily noticed that, even though the difference between the two younger groups of informants does not seem to be significant, the difference between the oldest and the two younger groups is easily visible to the naked eye. Although the general results of the statistical analysis does not show any significance (p= 0.108) of this factor, one can notice considerable difference between the oldest and the two remaining groups. If they were to compare, the p-value would equal 0.04 which would prove the statistical significance of the age factor.
3.5 Education

The study participants’ academic background was the last of the analysed factors which could affect their decision whether to teach or not to teach English pronunciation to their students. 36% of the subjects were graduates of first-cycle studies and held the title of Bachelor of Arts (BA), while the remaining 64% of the informants completed also second-cycle studies or uniform Master’s studies and held the title of Master of Arts (MA). In the group consisting of BAs, only about 14% of the study participants taught English phonetics, while in the group comprising MAs the number was much higher and equaled about 37%. As one can see, the difference between the groups is rather substantial. The statistical analysis gives the p-value at the level of 0.015 which proves the statistical significance of the result.
4. Summary
The study described above shows that some of the sociological factors affecting the teachers of English as a foreign/second language may influence their decisions whether to teach or not to teach L2 pronunciation to their students in a school environment. The teachers’ education and place of living seem to be the most important and the most influential factors here. Both the raw numbers and the statistical analysis show their significance. In the case of sex factor, no serious differences were noticed between the group of female teachers and the group of male teachers. However, the matter of age seems to be more complicated. Although there is no significant difference between the group of teachers who are 25-35 years old and the group of teachers who are 36-45 years old, and the statistical analysis does not reveal any significance of the factor in question in general, one can observe a huge difference between the oldest teachers (>45 years of age) and the two younger groups. It can be noticed that most of the members of the oldest group tend not to teach phonetics at all. Finally, the place of work of the study participants seems to be rather important. With the p-value at the level of 0.103, it is not statistically significant, but still the significance is more considerable than in the case of e.g. the subjects’ sex.

Naturally it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on the basis of only sociological factors as the decision whether to teach or not to teach L2 pronunciation is affected by numerous other factors which may be more personal, as well as by both the teachers and learners’ motivation, language aptitude, level of proficiency or the teaching programmes they are enrolled in. Nevertheless, the sociological analysis is also worth carrying out, especially since there is lack of such in the literature concerning teaching foreign pronunciation. Such studies usually concentrate on the teachers’ opinions about teaching phonetics and their former experience in this kind of training.

REFERENCES
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