They Prepare You What to Say, but do They Teach You How to Say It?

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Abstract
It cannot be denied that research on L2 pronunciation has developed greatly in the last decades, nevertheless the conclusions drawn from such studies are rarely applied in practice, especially in the school curricula. Studies carried out in Poland since early 2000s have proven that pronunciation teaching is still almost absent at schools (apart from the academic level) and that L2 learners are highly critical concerning both their own as well as their teachers’ pronunciation in EFL. Although it has been shown that correct pronunciation is crucial in L2 communication and that this element of L2 competence has been included in the oral part of the school-leaving (Matura) exam (CKE, 2013), the popular claim is that it is still difficult to find any elements of pronunciation training in textbooks designed for this kind of schools. The first aim of this paper is to compare the latest versions of compendia (repetytoria in Polish) usually applied in the last class of this type of school. The books are used to revise all the previously acquired knowledge about an L2 and are supposed to include theory and exercises in all skills and elements of a target language. And as learners graduating from upper-secondary school are about nineteen years old and, moreover, some of them may stop learning L2 intensively after graduation, it is the last chance to work seriously on English phonetics. The study results show that in most cases, although a separate pronunciation module is not included, word-lists in compendia are usually accompanied by audio tracks and, in some cases, even IPA is applied. Another aim of the study is to examine whether upper-secondary L2 teachers pay attention to their learners’ pronunciation and train it. An online questionnaire concerning pronunciation teaching practices was completed by 51 teachers from all over Poland and this did not bring optimistic results.

Keywords: pronunciation teaching, English phonetics, upper-secondary school textbooks
1. Introduction

In recent years the number of studies on second language pronunciation has grown significantly, however some areas still need to be analysed (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2014), and it can be observed that the situation when the conclusions drawn from the research are not applied in practice is quite common. Most often it happens in the case of school curricula, where classical methods of teaching and practising only selected skills still prevail.

2. Previous Research

Numerous studies conducted for about 16 years have shown that the status of pronunciation teaching in Polish schools is still very low, and that learners are critical not only of their own pronunciation skills but also of their teachers’ abilities to speak correctly.

As Szpyra–Kozłowska (2008) notices, the importance of phonodydactics seems to be still neglected in most Polish schools, because grammar and vocabulary are regarded as the most important aspects of language teaching/learning. Also the quality of pronunciation teaching is frequently and widely criticised by other specialists in this field (Porzuczek, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska et al., 2002; Majer, 2002; Wysocka, 2003). Moreover, this situation can be regarded as an effect of a (still) low priority of pronunciation skills in various language examinations, such as Polish Matura (the school leaving exam), American TOEFL and Cambridge ESOL examinations (Waniek-Klimczak and Dłutek, 2003; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2003). It is important that in all of the aforementioned exams, communications skills are those that are perceived as the most important ones (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008). Nowacka (2003) claims that school graduates do not usually regard correct pronunciation as an important aspect of language and are mostly characterised by a low phonetic competence. What is more, L2 teachers frequently argue that there is a lack of proper resources useful in pronunciation teaching. This, however, should not be regarded as a problem anymore. The number of available materials is growing constantly and various strategies and techniques of effective pronunciation teaching have already appeared and have received a great attention among Polish researches (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008).

Low phonetic competence, however, does not seem to be only a characteristic of students, but also of many L2 teachers (Waniek-Klimczak, 2006). In her paper, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2008) replicates and contrasts her two previous studies in which she analysed a level of English classes in various Polish high schools, as well as a level of the competence of English teachers from these very schools. The results of both studies show that there was no single class devoted to English pronunciation and only very few lessons contained elements of any pronunciation exercises. What is more, students from these schools observed that their teachers did not pay attention to learners’ pronunciation in L2, claimed that pronunciation was not an important part of language learning and often used a pseudo-phonetic transcription (e.g. the word a nurse was transcribed by teachers as /e ners/). Moreover, also the teachers’ pronunciation was characterised by their students as...
“full of errors” (it included e.g. incorrect vowel length, final devoicing of obstruents etc). It can be stated without any doubt that low phonetic competence of teachers and the lack of the classes devoted to second language pronunciation certainly contribute to students’ low phonetic competence in L2.

Lipińska’s (2014) study confirms the opinions and conclusions mentioned above. Four groups of subjects provided the researcher with similar comments concerning the lack of pronunciation classes or modules at school, teachers’ difficulties in correct articulation of foreign sounds, etc.

3. The Importance of Correct Pronunciation

As has been already mentioned, for about two decades second language teaching concentrated on successful and effective communication. The teachers focused on conversation skills, but also frequently on elimination -to a large extent- of formal instruction in other, “traditional” skills. Nevertheless, in order to communicate successfully, a language learner has to be characterized by correct pronunciation (Komorowska, 2011). They must understand other speakers and this is probably one of the most vital abilities. What is more, language users need to be understood correctly, so their speech must be intelligible enough to convey the intended message (e.g. Littlewood, 1994; Tarone, 1978; Beebe,1984). It is important not only for the communication with the native speakers of a particular language, but also with other non-native speakers who do not share the same language background and hence their pronunciation may be affected in various ways (Littlewood, 1994; Setter and Jenkins, 2005). One can still observe that L2 learners often care a lot not only about basic communication, but also about some grammatical (syntactic) norms and errors at all stages of proficiency. On the other hand, they tend to forget that grammatical norm is not the only type of norm which needs to be taken into consideration if someone wishes for approximating (more or less) the native models, and language learners frequently disregard pragmatic, morphological, orthographic and phonetic norms (Sobkowiak, 2004). It is a common situation when L2 learners care less for proper pronunciation and are usually more concentrated on comprehension skills and grammatical rules, especially when they have not been trained to discriminate major phonetic differences since the very early stages of learning L2 (Eddine, 2011).

4. Pronunciation in Polish Matura Exam

Although the assessment of correct pronunciation in a foreign/second language was not included in the previous versions of the upper-secondary school exit exam (so-called Matura), it has finally appeared in the new edition of the examination. Firstly it could be found in the revised oral part of the examination in 2012, and then the change continued in the fully revised Matura from the 2014/2015 school year (CKE, 2013). The addition of a new aspect can be regarded as a positive change, suggesting that pronunciation skills have eventually been valued. On the other hand, it comprises barely 2 points out of 30 that can be obtained during the oral part of the exam. The potential score is as follows:
Table 1: The potential score at the oral part of Polish Matura exam (CKE, 2013; translated by the author of this paper)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills assessed</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Points altogether (maximum)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills (assessed separately in each task)</td>
<td>0 – 6</td>
<td>18 (6 points x 3 tasks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The range of the applied grammatical and vocabulary structures (assessed during the whole exam)</td>
<td>0 – 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The correctness of the applied grammatical and vocabulary structures (assessed during the whole exam)</td>
<td>0 – 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation (assessed during the whole exam)</td>
<td>0 – 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking fluency (assessed during the whole exam)</td>
<td>0 – 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL SCORE – 30 points

Having looked at the table above, one can easily calculate that those 2 points equal only about 6.7% out of the total score. However, for some students this number may be crucial for the university enrolment process.

5. Current Study

The first aim of this study is to compare the latest editions of the most popular compendia (Repetytoria in Polish) usually applied in the last class(es) of upper-secondary schools, paying special attention to any elements of pronunciation training. This kind of school textbooks is generally used to revise all the previously acquired knowledge about a given L2. They are supposed to include both theory and practical exercises in all skills and elements of a target language. Compendia are mainly used to revise the teaching/learning material before various exams and this is also the case in upper-secondary schools where learners have to pass the Matura school-leaving exam in order to complete secondary education and obtain a certificate confirming this fact, as well as to be accepted to universities or colleges of further education. And as learners graduating from upper-secondary school are about nineteen years old and, some of them may stop learning a foreign language
so intensively (or even at all), it is their last chance to work seriously on English phonetics.

The main problem lies in the fact that in the oral part of the aforementioned exam pronunciation skills are not highly valued and hence may not be exercised to a sufficient extent. Since compendia are used at least during the last class of upper-secondary schools (and it often happens that teachers decide to make them the basic tool not only in the final year but also in the last but one, thus working with this kind of books for about two years) it is difficult to imagine that learners can do without pronunciation training for such a long time. This is why, although it is not their main aim, compendia for upper-secondary schools should contain extended tasks connected to developing speaking skills, as well as some pronunciation training of at least the words included in the thematic vocabulary lists.

Another aim of this study is to examine upper-secondary teachers’ opinions and practices concerning pronunciation training in the final years of this kind of school. Since previous studies showed that pronunciation teaching is virtually absent at schools and teachers enumerate various excuses for this condition (see e.g. Baran-Lucarz, 2006), it seems vital to check whether the situation has recently changed, especially in the light of growing popularity of the focus on successful communication in foreign languages.

6. Study Results: Compendia

The eight most popular compendia for upper-secondary schools were selected basing on the anonymous online questionnaire for junior high school teachers from whole Poland (all sixteen voivodeships; 51 teachers responded) and the analysis of the retail sales in six bookshops in the region of Silesia (south of Poland). The content was analysed, paying attention to the skills and elements included in various sections of the book, but also the content of the attached CDs or available MP3 files was assessed. The basic data is presented in Table 2 below. The level of textbooks is also provided since the written part of Matura may be taken at either basic or extended level and this is why most publishers prepare separate textbooks for the two levels. Nevertheless, there is only one level of oral Matura.

Table 2: The content of eight most popular compendia for upper-secondary schools in Poland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title and level</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Skills exercised</th>
<th>Separate pronunciation training?</th>
<th>IPA included?</th>
<th>Audio included?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destination: Matura 2015 (basic + extended)</td>
<td>Beata Polit, Halina Tyliba, Marta Inglot, Izabela Michalak, Anna Milewska, Katarzyna Mrozowska-Linda</td>
<td>Nowa Era</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, use of English, listening, comprehension, reading, writing, speaking</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longman Repetytorium Maturalne (basic)</td>
<td>Marta Umińska, Bob Hastings, Dominika Chandler, Rod Fricker, Angela Bandis, Beata Trapnell</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longman Repetytorium Maturalne (extended)</td>
<td>Marta Umińska, Bob Hastings, Dominika Chandler, Rod Fricker, Beata Trapnell</td>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matura Repetytorium (basic)</td>
<td>Jenny Dooley, Virginia Evans</td>
<td>Egis/Express Publishing</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matura Repetytorium (extended)</td>
<td>Jenny Dooley, Virginia Evans</td>
<td>Egis/Express Publishing</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matura 2015 Repetytorium (basic + extended)</td>
<td>Marta Rosińska, Lynda Edwards</td>
<td>Macmillan</td>
<td>vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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As one can see in the Table above, all the analysed compendia do not include any particular, separate sections devoted to practising pronunciation skills in L2. It is worrying as the books do not include only examination tasks, but develop almost all skills step-by-step and one certainly could find space for small pronunciation tasks and exercises (like in e.g. textbooks for primary schools – see Lipińska, in press). It is especially important as the speaking sections are basically mock examination sheets which require conversation skills and ability to build one’s own, longer utterances and there is no place for gradual development of those.

However, there is also a positive aspect of the aforementioned books. Not only there are either audio CDs attached or MP3 files available for downloading which are used for completing listening comprehension tasks, but in most cases thematic vocabulary lists are also accompanied by audio files and, in some books, even IPA is provided next to the words. This certainly helps learn or revise new vocabulary as teenage students learn not only how to write words but also how to say them. They may even download audio files onto their smartphones and listen to them e.g. while commuting to school. One of the greatest aspects found in this section is vocabulary banks by Pearson. Recordings for their vocabulary banks not only contain audio representations of the words included in the lists, but also translation and repetition tasks enabling language learners active learning of the new vocabulary.

Regarding negative aspects found in the analysed compendia, almost none of them (except for compendia by Pearson) include audio recordings or phonetic transcription for speaking banks. Speaking banks are banks of useful phrases used to express opinion, uncertainty, disagreement etc., necessary for successful communication and conversation tasks included in the oral part of Matura exam. Unfortunately it leads to common pronunciation mistakes Polish examiners are usually familiar with. It frequently happens that learners make mistakes on a
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segmental level and apply Polish vowels to English contexts and say /aɪ fɪnκ/ instead of /ɑʊθɪŋk/ when they mean I think or /ɡʊt ərdɪə/ instead of /ɡʊd ərdɪə/ when they mean good idea.

7. Study Results: an Online Questionnaire

As the final part of the study, an online questionnaire for upper-secondary school teachers was applied. It aimed at examining the teachers’ attitudes towards pronunciation training at upper-secondary school and whether they include a pronunciation module in their school curriculum. 51 English teachers working in upper-secondary schools completed the questionnaire. Only subjects teaching two final years at this kind of school were chosen. Most of them (38) were females. They were 27-50 years old and had been teaching English as a foreign language for 3-25 years prior to the study. Thanks to the online form, the teachers involved in the project were from all over Poland and taught at various upper-secondary schools. Most of them (37) taught at general upper-secondary schools (liceum), and the rest of them - at technical colleges (technikum). Firstly, they helped choose the most popular textbooks (see section 6), secondly they answered a couple of questions concerning pronunciation teaching and shed some new light on the topic. In the questionnaire there were statements with a 5-point Likert scale for agreement, closed-ended questions with five possible answers and space for the teachers’ own comments. The results are presented below.

7.1 I am satisfied with my students’ pronunciation in English.

![Figure 1](image)

The number of teachers who are satisfied or dissatisfied with their learners’ pronunciation in EFL.

As one can see above, only seventeen teachers were more or less satisfied with their learners’ pronunciation in English as a foreign language. A majority (twenty-
nine subjects) were dissatisfied with what they heard. This result is not optimistic, especially when we consider the fact that the students in question had been learning English at their upper-secondary school for at least a year (general school) or two years (technical college). This may suggest the lack of sufficient (or any) pronunciation training during L2 classes. What is also interesting, is the fact that five teachers could not assess their students’ pronunciation in a second language. This might be caused by the teachers’ uncertainty concerning pronunciation norms or insufficient number of speaking tasks during the classes when a teacher could hear their students.

7.2 *I teach my students correct pronunciation of English.*

The second question concerned pronunciation training during L2 classes. The answers provided by the subjects showed that this skill is not frequently taught. Only two teachers chose the answer “always”, and seven – “often”. It gives nine teachers out of fifty-one who pay attention to correct articulation of sounds in an L2. The vast majority of informants chose the safe option “sometimes” which is not precise, but suggests that this kind of training may be absent in most instances of L2 classes. Six teachers chose the answer “rarely”, but what is the most worrying result is the remaining six teachers who admitted that they never teach the rules of correct pronunciation in English.
7.3 *I correct my students’ pronunciation mistakes.*

The next question was based on an assumption that maybe even if pronunciation is not taught during foreign language classes, the teachers may actively correct their students’ utterances also on a phonetic level. Here the results were slightly better – sixteen teachers altogether do it “always” or “often” providing their learners with valuable feedback, needed to improve pronunciation and communication skills. However, again the vast majority chose the option “sometimes” which may be insufficient if one wants to teach students correct English. Unfortunately, two subject rarely correct their students’ pronunciation mistakes, and four teachers never do it.
7.4 I think that correct pronunciation is necessary at the Matura exam.

![Figure 4](image-url)

The number of teachers who find correct pronunciation important at the school-leaving exam.

Here the teachers were divided into two large groups – those who found the pronunciation component vital at the exam and those who thought it was unimportant. The explanation might be logical in the case of this question. All the teachers are aware how many point can an examinee score for this skill and that this number is not high. However, some teachers and learners fight for the best and highest results possible, while some concentrate on bare passing the exam. It happens frequently that the former are from top schools and best group, competing in rankings, and the latter are those from weaker groups or classes where teachers strive to help their learners pass the exams and simply graduate.

7.5 Teachers’ Comments

The subjects were also allowed to leave any comments they wanted concerning the subject of the questionnaire. Not all the study participants left comments, however there were enough of them to draw some conclusions. Selected comments are presented below, divided into two groups: one advocating teaching L2 pronunciation and another – explaining the lack of this kind of training.

- I think that correct pronunciation in English is crucial – both in communication and at the exam. I want my students to obtain the highest score at the oral part of the exam which will enable them to go the best university.
- My classes participate in students exchanges – students from abroad visit us and then we visit them in their countries. I want my learners to communicate without problems. Correct pronunciation in English enables
not only communication, but also makes my students feel confident and as good as their foreign counterparts.

- I think that training pronunciation helps my students communicate abroad – e.g. on holidays.
- My learners want to study English philology – they must be prepared.
- Our school is high-ranked. My students need to speak English perfectly.
- I want the best scores at the Matura exam.
- Correct pronunciation is a matter of prestige.
- My students’ parents pay for this school – they require perfect results.
- I don’t have time for pronunciation training. I can barely find time for other, more important things – grammar, vocabulary. I must prepare my students for the exams.
- I will be happy if they pass the exam. We don’t aim at high scores.
- My class is very poor – I am glad if they learn anything. I don’t have time and conditions for teaching pronunciation.
- I must teach my students enough to say anything – points for pronunciation are not so important.
- My students are intelligible enough – I can understand them. If they want to learn pronunciation, they can watch American or British films.
- No time and no resources. Pronunciation must wait.
- There are too many skills to practice – reading, listening, use of English... I can’t find time for more. I have to skip even other exercises – I can never finish my compendium on time.

Having read the comments above, one can assume that there two groups of teachers (and learners). The first group consists of so-called good learners who probably attend schools with a higher number of language classes. Teachers in such schools have better and more comfortable conditions and can concentrate not only on the basic exam preparation, but also have time for extended activities. Moreover, the prestige of a school seems to be important hence the higher level of language learning. The latter group may consist of students who have more difficulties in language learning, and their teachers feel they do not have enough time and opportunities to convey all the necessary knowledge and train all the necessary skills. They need to resign from something and, unfortunately, it is the pronunciation training. It is harmful for learners as they not only are characterised by a lower language competence, but also not knowing how the words ought to be pronounced, may have problems understanding others. It can discourage them from further language learning. Naturally, it is just the assumption and the reasons for this situation might far more complex.

8. Conclusions

The study results clearly show that in practically all cases the compendia for upper-secondary schools do not contain separate pronunciation training sections although they include such sections aiming at developing the remaining language skills. It works against students since they are not sufficiently prepared for the oral part of
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the school-leaving exam where correct pronunciation in an L2 is also evaluated. What is certainly a positive aspect, is the fact that the analysed compendia have well-prepared thematic vocabulary banks. Not only each chapter of the book is accompanied by an exhaustive list of words, but additionally audio recordings with correct pronunciation of those words are available, and in some cases the vocabulary items are presented in both spelling and IPA forms. This enables language learners to acquire new vocabulary more easily and concentrate on both written and spoken forms of new words.

The situation is more variable regarding pronunciation training in final years of upper-secondary schools. While some teachers declare that they teach L2 phonetics to their learners and that they correct their students’ pronunciation mistakes, other teachers claim not to have time for it or not to be interested in the topic. The situation may be a result of various factors starting from the teachers’ personal beliefs concerning language and pronunciation teaching, and ending at the lack of time to train all the necessary skills or teaching weaker groups of students who encounter numerous difficulties while learning EFL.

What cannot be denied is the need to provide language learners with at least basic pronunciation training facilitating successful communication in everyday situations and helping achieve good scores at final exams. Paradoxically it may be even more useful for weaker learners who, not being able to understand other speakers, can feel more discouraged from further language learning.

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Documents: