

**THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL
PHONETIC INSTRUCTION
IN THE EYES OF ADVANCED STUDENTS.
AN EDITORIAL TO RIL SPECIAL ISSUE
VOL. 21.3 AND 21.4 ON PRONUNCIATION RESEARCH
AND PRONUNCIATION LEARNING/TEACHING
IN A GLOBAL EFL PERSPECTIVE.**

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Abstract

The article focuses on advanced students' beliefs and views related to their own pronunciation and pronunciation learning/teaching. It also presents their opinions on the university courses dedicated to phonetics and phonology of the English language. Furthermore, it analyses the students plans and ambitions for their future self-study and intentions to further develop and improve their English pronunciation. Finally, the article introduces varied and numerous research areas investigated in the current two issues of RIL and points to the significance of the most recent findings in the field.

Key words: phonetic instruction, pronunciation awareness, learner beliefs, needs' analysis, pronunciation instruction

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is a vital aspect of communication and an integral part of learning a foreign language. Theoretical knowledge relying on both understanding the phonetic system as well as being aware of phonological speech processes raises students' awareness, leads to more conscious practice and stimulates pronunciation/speech improvement. Practical phonetics courses, on the other hand, promote active pronunciation practice (comprising both perception and production) and so they also contribute to achieving better pronunciation and increasing self-awareness in speech production. Addressing the values of

pronunciation learning leads to students' conscious efforts to improve it (Sardegna, Lee and Kusey, 2018). Learning/teaching process relies on the interaction between teachers and learners. Undoubtedly, learners/students constitute the focal point in the process and lie in the centre of attention of teachers and educators. Thus, learners' beliefs and attitudes are of paramount importance and investigations addressing them help shed light on training relevance and efficacy. Much research has been conducted with reference to teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) (Derwing, Diepenbroek, & Foote, 2012; Derwing & Munro, 2011; Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2007). When English as a foreign language (EFL) context is concerned, there are a number of studies that focus on high-school learners and their needs, wants and views with regard to pronunciation (Jarosz, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). Moreover, certain studies examine the attitudes of English majors towards pronunciation learning (Majer, 2002; Waniek-Klimczak, 1997). English majors undergo a special intensive training in English pronunciation, phonetics and phonology in the first year of their English studies in Poland. Therefore, they constitute an interesting group to investigate in terms of their pronunciation beliefs and expectations, especially that they learn English to become teachers or English language experts in the future. Their opinions also provide an insight into how they evaluate the courses, the usefulness and effectiveness of the courses as well as the benefits the students gain from the acquired knowledge.

2. Learners' beliefs and attitudes: an overview of previous research

Although much research has been conducted to explore the beliefs, views and attitudes of students towards pronunciation, the outcomes seem quite contradictory depending on factors such as age, proficiency level or the intensity of language engagement. When the significance of pronunciation instruction is concerned, however, most respondents declare their full awareness that it is relevant especially in the context of the communicative function of English in the global world. Jarosz (2019) investigated the beliefs and needs of secondary school learners who declared that they needed pronunciation practice and considered it an essential part of foreign language learning. Waniek-Klimczak (1997) found that the majority of English students (99%) declared that pronunciation was important in language learning. The respondents in Sobkowiak's study (2002) expressed their wish to have more phonetic training and practice during their studies. Smit and Dalton (2000) reported that students perceived pronunciation instruction as a difficult venture. Unquestionably, regular classroom practice is conducive to more success and pronunciation awareness-raising than individual autonomous learning, which requires high engagement and high intrinsic motivation from the learners (Sardegna and Jarosz, 2022; Sardegna and Jarosz, 2023).

Some studies undertook to investigate the importance of L2 pronunciation in comparison with other language subsystems. Sobkowiak (2002) reported that 67% of subjects did not regard pronunciation as more significant than lexis or grammar. Surprisingly, the teacher training college students of English in Majer's study (2002) placed pronunciation mistakes at the very bottom of the so-called error gravity scale. This resulted from their beliefs that pronunciation mistakes are the least important as they do not affect understanding or spoken communication. Pawlak (2008) found that English philology students ranked pronunciation as the second, lexis as the first and grammar as the third in the hierarchy of language subsystems. He commented that more and more frequently students appreciate the relevance of the communicative dimension of speech and the crucial role of pronunciation in spoken discourse.

As regards pronunciation learning goals, the dichotomy of goals discussed by Levis (2005, 2020) can still be observed. The Principles of Nativeness and of Intelligibility determine the students' choices and goals. Nativeness refers to learners' desire to achieve native-like pronunciation, which can be explained by strong convictions that native-like pronunciation secures better job opportunities and career prospects, especially in teaching professions (Levis, 2020). Intelligibility, on the other hand, is the principle relying on the need to be able to produce speech, which is intelligible (understood) to interlocutors regardless of a foreign accent. The goal of intelligibility tends to prevail in ESL contexts whereas both the nativeness and intelligibility principles seem to be equally popular in EFL settings. Waniek-Klimczak and Klimczak (2005) investigated students at the Institute of English Studies and found that "the students seem to set the main goals close to what we might interpret as 'comfortable intelligibility', the aim advocated in pronunciation teaching by e.g. Kenworthy (1987) and Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994)" (Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005, p. 231). Furthermore, Nowacka (2017) found that Polish students of English were more and more frequently inclined to set themselves the goal of comfortable intelligibility believing that native-like pronunciation was highly unlikely to attain. Similar views were expressed by young learners surveyed by Tergujeff (2013). As was observed by Majer & Waniek-Klimczak (2001), English majors regarded speaking as the most difficult skill to learn. Moreover, English majors underscored the need to achieve fluency and confidence in speech (Waniek-Klimczak, 1997) as well as accurate and native-like production (Pawlak, 2008). Furthermore, Pawlak's analysis (2011) revealed students' awareness that pronunciation must be studied in a planned, systematic and structured manner as "its mastery is important because it has the potential to contribute to successful communication" (Pawlak, 2015, p. 18). The students emphasised a great role of extensive out-of-class listening as an invaluable factor in pronunciation acquisition as well as the importance of practicing pronunciation features in spontaneous uncontrolled speech.

As regards the accent variety model set as the goal for learners and students, research findings generally indicate the tendency that more proficient English students choose native accents more frequently than non-native ones. Received Pronunciation (RP) was frequently selected as the most desired accent model of pronunciation (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, and Smit, 1997; Waniek-Klimczak, 1997, 2002). Janicka et al. (2005) as well as Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk, and Porzuczek's (2015) found that English majors in Poland valued highly Standard British (SSBE) and Standard American (GA) as pronunciation target models. Similar attitudes were presented by Polish secondary school learners in Jarosz (2019). Smojver and Stanojevic (2013) indicated that students preferred native models over non-native ones and tended to react negatively towards foreign-accented speech.

3. The Study

Several studies have investigated English students' attitudes towards pronunciation. However, it seems interesting to observe how their needs and wants progressed after phonetic training and whether they still plan to further develop their knowledge base in the field and to continue to enhance their pronunciation skills. Thus, the aim of the study was to investigate the students' pronunciation-related opinions, their goals, needs and wants for the future as well as strategies they found useful and the evaluation of the courses with suggestions as to how to improve their efficacy. In this light, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the English majors' beliefs with regard to pronunciation?
2. How useful were the courses the students attended for the development of their pronunciation skills and their speech?
3. What are the students' learning objectives for the future once their phonetic awareness has been raised?

3.1 Participants

Thirty one students (19-20 years old) at the beginning of their second year of Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme at the Institute of English Studies in Łódź participated in the study. They agreed to complete a questionnaire and engage in interviews with the researcher about their beliefs, attitudes and phonetic plans for the future. They had completed three correlated courses in their first year at the Institute: 60-hour practical phonetics classes, 60-hour descriptive grammar (phonetics and phonology) classes, and a 30-hour descriptive grammar (phonetics and phonology) lecture. The practical phonetics classes were entirely dedicated to pronunciation training and developing the skills of perception and production at the segmental and word-level accuracy. The students practiced the articulation of individual sounds and difficult polysyllabic words, they also learnt phonemic

transcription. The descriptive grammar classes comprised the knowledge base of the phonological system of English, sound categorisation and descriptions, allophonic variants, connected speech processes, English syllable structure, as well as English stress and rhythm. The lecture, on the other hand, equipped the students with the theoretical background to the phonological system of the English language.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study triangulated data from a Likert scale survey, open ended questions and semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 students who volunteered to further comment on the questionnaire. The Likert scale survey comprised fifteen statements eliciting the students' opinions on their attitudes to pronunciation learning and teaching. Mean values and the standard deviation were counted for the survey. The four open-ended questions made students reflect on their pronunciation knowledge and strategies employed in the learning process as well as their needs and goals for the future. The questions were:

1. What could be improved or changed in the two courses?
2. In what ways are you trying to improve your pronunciation?
3. What are your pronunciation goals and priorities?
4. What would you like to improve in the nearest future in your pronunciation to achieve your goals?

In the semi-structured interviews conducted after the surveys (lasting about 10 minutes and recorded by the researcher), the students elaborated more on their pronunciation-related feelings and future goals. Thematic analysis of the survey answers and interview results was carried out to indicate the recurrent topics most frequently mentioned by the students.

3.3 Results

The first research question referred to the respondents' beliefs on pronunciation learning and teaching. As can be seen in Table 1, all the students regarded pronunciation as significant in the skill of speaking ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.32$). The majority of them admitted also that learning pronunciation does not pose many problems ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.82$), and it should definitely be taught and integrated within the general English courses. When asked about teaching pronunciation, most of the students were indecisive about whether it is difficult to teach pronunciation ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.67$). The explanation lies most probably in the fact that they generally did not yet have much experience in teaching English. All but five students admitted to being familiar with phonetic transcription, and 28 of them reported that it was useful in learning English pronunciation ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.70$). Most of the students declared not being satisfied with their pronunciation when they started the English studies and 21 of them claimed it has

improved after the intensive first year of phonetics and phonology courses ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.68$). Moreover, 20 of them admitted that their speech had improved significantly.

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = I do not know; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree)

	Statement	Mean	SD
1.	Pronunciation is important in speaking English	4.54	0.32
2.	English pronunciation is difficult to learn	2.74	0.82
3.	I find the practical phonetics course last year useful	4.03	0.30
4.	I find the descriptive grammar course last year useful	3.87	1.10
5.	I am satisfied with the phonetics and descriptive grammar courses	4.00	0.96
6.	Pronunciation should be taught during general English courses	4.32	0.61
7.	It is difficult to teach English pronunciation	2.41	0.67
8.	I know phonetic transcription	4.03	0.57
9.	Phonetic transcription is useful in learning English pronunciation	4.19	0.70
10.	I was satisfied with my pronunciation before the university	2.00	0.91
11.	My pronunciation has improved after the first year	3.93	0.68
12.	I speak better now	3.87	0.80
13.	Nativeness is my goal	3.70	1.24
14.	My pronunciation needs further improvement	4.38	0.68
15.	I will be a good accent model for my learners	3.35	0.90

When asked about the strategies applied to improve pronunciation skills, the students enumerated the following themes (the number in the brackets refers to the number of students who mentioned the particular theme):

- listening and watching in original (21)
- speaking to myself (9)
- talking to native speakers (9)
- looking up pronunciation of unknown words (8)
- talking to others in English (8)
- repetition of new words and phrases (7)
- paying more attention to own speech (6)
- reading aloud (5)
- learning dialogues (3)
- imitation (3)
- speaking in front of the mirror (1)
- focus on stress (1)
- focus on sounds (1)
- exposure to different accents (1)
- practice transcription (1)

In the interview comments, the students reinforced their strategy choices and referred most commonly to the importance of the listening input in learning pronunciation. The second most significant behaviour after perception practice and extensive exposure to varied listening input was production practice. Here are some of the comments:

The best way to learn pronunciation is by listening to natives speaking (S5)

English should be everywhere surrounding us so we can learn it unconsciously (S7)

I try to use English as much as possible. When I do not know how to say something, I check or ask (S3).

The second research question aimed to elicit the students' evaluation of the courses, opinions on their usefulness and suggestions for improvements. As regards the course of practical phonetics, the students were unanimous in saying that it was useful and thus conducive to phonetic awareness raising ($M=4.03$, $SD=0.30$). They observed that their phonetic progress resulted from in-class perception and production practice. Some interview comments indicate that the students were appreciative of the practical dimension of the classes:

It was an eye-opener for me. I always thought that I was good and here I learnt how much I still must work (S11)

I have never had pronunciation practice before. I see now how important it is. (S7)

Such practical classes are very important. (S1)

When it comes to the descriptive grammar course, which was more theoretical and required more academic effort in that the students had to read certain book chapters and reflect on the sound system of English, describe the system as well as grasp selected phonological and phonostylistic processes in the language, the opinions varied noticing presumably the less practical aspect of the subject ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.10$). All in all, the degree of satisfaction of the students with both the subjects seems relatively high, reaching the mean value of 4.0. One of the open-ended questions invited the students to offer suggestions for improving the content and organisation of the two courses. Here, their comments could be grouped into several areas identifying the directions in which the courses could be modified. The majority of them asserted that they would suggest more practice (12) and less theory (4). There was, however, one comment declaring the need for more theory. Two respondents indicated that the material was difficult to learn and the reading passages were hard to understand. Some of the students focused on the types of pronunciation aspects they would want to practice more such as: stress patterns (7), connected speech processes (2), allophonic variants (2), comparison of accent varieties (3). Moreover, some students declared they would expect more exercises such as dialogues (4), more individual work (2), more entertaining exercises (1), more speaking (2), and more descriptive grammar exercises (1). Three students had no ideas as to what could be improved in the classes. In the follow-up interviews, one person mentioned the terminology and metalanguage that caused comprehension problems and yet another student suggested using a simplified language to describe the phenomena: "I could not understand everything, I wish the language was simpler during the classes" (S10).

The last three statements in the Likert scale questionnaire, together with some of the open-ended questions and the interviews, provided answers to the third research question aiming to discover the students' pronunciation-related plans for the future and their future goals. It can be tentatively observed that the thorough one-year long pronunciation awareness-raising training made them more sensitive and conscious about their pronunciation needs. The majority of the students (25) agreed that nativeness was their ultimate goal in pronunciation learning ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.24$). Three, however, declared nativeness was not the aim they intended to accomplish. Here are a few interview comments from the students about the goals of nativeness and intelligibility:

I do not want to sound awkward when I talk. I want to sound more natural like a native speaker (S5)

I'd like to speak with less Polish manner (S6)

I want to be understood. I want to pronounce words correctly, but I want to keep my essence. I think no Polish speaker can achieve native level of speech (S2)

I don't aspire to sound like an American or a Brit, but I want my pronunciation to sound good, not amateur-like (S3)

I want to pronounce all the words correctly, retain my own accent, be easily understood by native speakers (S7)

Further insights could be found in the open-ended question eliciting the students' pronunciation goals. They wished:

- to speak fluently (10)
- to be understood (7)
- to have native-like pronunciation (7)
- to sound like a native British (6)
- to reduce Polish accent (4)
- to have correct and clear speech (3)
- to sound like a GA native speaker (2)
- to have better accent and intonation (2)
- to sound natural (2)
- to pronounce words properly (2)
- to have a decent British and American accent (1)
- to speak like James Corden (1)
- to imitate different accents for fun (1)
- not to be shy (1)

Only half of the students (16) claimed that they would be good accent models for their future learners, which might result from their consciousness that there was still much room for improvement. It was reflected in the survey, in which the majority of the respondents declared the necessity to improve their pronunciation ($M=4.38$, $SD=0.68$) and in the open-ended questionnaire, where they indicated areas of pronunciation that they would desire to enhance:

- fluency (11)
- intonation (9)
- accent (9)
- stress (6)
- 'th' sounds (6)
- pronunciation in fast speech (5)
- pronunciation accuracy (5)
- rhoticity/non-rhoticity (4)
- being more consistent and not mixing varieties (4)
- rhythm (3)
- pitch stress (2)
- final consonant devoicing (1)
- reduce mispronunciations (1)
- weak forms (1)
- more confidence (1)
- melody (1)
- get more experience (1)

- vowels (1)
- understanding everyday native speech (1)

The variety of themes that merit further refinement and development mentioned by the students indicates their raised pronunciation awareness and the ability to reflect on their own speech and to set their own goals for further development. Here are a few of the comments noted down during the interviews:

I have discovered the areas in which I have problems and right now I am trying to find a way to solve them (S4)

There is still a lot to improve and I want to work on it (S7)

Learning the theory helped me to improve speech in practice and I am going to study more. I see it helps in the practical way (S4)

4. Discussion and conclusions

Most students in the study consider pronunciation relevant, which corroborates the earlier studies (Waniek-Klimczak, 1997). They believe pronunciation is crucial in speaking English and constitutes a vital component of spoken intelligible and comprehensible discourse. Almost all participants supported the previous findings that pronunciation should be taught (in its all aspects) and integrated with general English courses (Jarosz, 2019; Sardegna, 2022). As regards the goals of pronunciation learning, the participants in the study follow the EFL tendencies in choosing the nativeness principle as their main objective (Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk & Porzuczek's, 2015).

Raising phonetic awareness unquestionably contributes to the development of phonetic skills and intentions to improve pronunciation skills (Sardegna, 2022, 2023). The empowerment and explicit explanation provided during both the phonetics and descriptive grammar classes as well as meta-competence acquired in the field enabled the students to make conscious decisions about pronunciation areas that required further practice and improvement. Most of the students admitted they needed to enhance their pronunciation skills and intended to do it in the future, which is a promising finding. Once the awareness has been raised, further efforts are likely to be made. The questionnaires might have potentially encouraged the students to conduct an analysis of their own needs and enforced them to continue practicing.

With reference to the level of satisfaction with the courses, clearly the phonetics course was valued more highly since it addressed the more practical facet of speech production and more hands-on experience with the language, which directly translated into the students' oral performance and listening comprehension competence. The descriptive grammar course, on the other hand, demanded a more theoretical knowledge-based approach relying on reading certain articles and chapters and understanding the system of the English

language. Thus, phonetics classes were considered more useful than descriptive grammar classes. The students' opinions could lead to the pedagogical assumptions that the courses' syllabi should emphasise a closer link between theory and practice and underscore how the theoretical grounds might be conducive to practical speech perception and production improvements.

5. The scope of the two volumes of Research in Language

Students' beliefs and attitudes are a relevant and pivotal area in pronunciation research as students are the main beneficiaries of the learning process. What makes the investigations interesting and worthwhile is that learners differ in many aspects and many variables affect their learning process and their perceptions on its success and feasibility (such as aptitude, competency, motivation, anxiety, L1/L2 identity, strategies employed or the degree of learner independence). The area of pronunciation research is a growing independent field branching out to various sciences and offering a lot of food for thought and different perspectives and approaches.

The two special issues of the Research in Language journal meet the current expectations and demands in the field and present selected cutting-edge studies in the science of phonetics, phonology, pronunciation teaching and research conducted in the global EFL context. They showcase the most recent findings contributing to the development of base knowledge in the following research areas:

- speech recognition,
- L2 learner speech,
- phonetic awareness raising,
- pronunciation-related communication breakdowns,
- pronunciation learning activities,
- learning variables such as anxiety, personality traits,
- fluency,
- learner pronunciation views and beliefs,
- speech rhythm in spontaneous and controlled settings,
- accuracy of L2 accent production of selected consonant clusters,
- different English renderings of foreign proper names.

The variety of topics covered in the two issues indicates the growing importance of pronunciation research and the relevance of its findings for both academic and pedagogical purposes as well as its versatility and huge potential to develop. The presented articles offer different directions for future research and can undoubtedly inspire new investigations in the field.

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