

*“The Acquisition of English Pronunciation in a
Polish Secondary School Setting”*

(„Akwizycja wymowy angielskiej w polskiej szkole średniej”)

The present dissertation examines the issue of the acquisition of English pronunciation by Polish secondary school learners (aged 16-19) from the perspective of the most relevant determinants of this process (learner-related, teacher-related and context-related factors, with the focus on the first type). This is done on the basis of an overview of the relevant literature (Chapters 1 and 2) and an empirical study with 12 students whose phonetic development and progress over the period of three years is analysed in detail in a longitudinal study (Chapter 3). The process of pronunciation acquisition by the participants and its outcome is next examined in relation to several learner-dependent variables (Chapter 4). This is, to my knowledge, the first work to undertake the above issues in the instructed secondary school setting in Poland. It is hoped to provide significant phonodidactic implications for the phonetic training of Polish teenagers.

There are three triggers for undertaking this research. First, an overview of the literature on English phonodidactics reveals a significant gap in the lack of thorough longitudinal studies on L2 pronunciation acquisition in a Polish secondary school setting which can provide valuable insights into the course and the conditioning of this process. What is needed in particular is an examination and better understanding of individual learner-related factors in pronunciation acquisition as they could enhance the quality of phonetic instruction in schools. Though many aspects of pronunciation teaching and learning at the university level have been adequately dealt with, a somewhat neglected area of research concerns school learners. The present thesis sets itself the task of filling this gap.

Secondly, foreign language pronunciation instruction has been shown by specialists to receive insufficient coverage in the National Core Curricula and, consequently, in a language classroom. The curricula for primary and secondary schools diminish the importance of pronunciation by their failure to specify phonetic requirements and by prioritising written skills over spoken ones. As a result, there arises a pressing need for a fundamental change in the national foreign language policy in Poland to cater more adequately for pronunciation

instruction. It is the author's hope that this study will provide a contribution to the discussion on the need to increase its statutory and educational prominence.

Thirdly, the choice of the subject matter and the undertaken research has been prompted by my deep personal and professional interest in phonodidactics. Since the submission of the MA thesis entitled "Techniques of teaching pronunciation" in 2002, the author, who is an upper-secondary school teacher and a former Teacher Training College pronunciation instructor, has published twelve papers on English pronunciation pedagogy in Polish senior secondary schools and delivered eleven papers devoted to these issues at various conferences. All these facts have exerted a direct impact on the current thesis.

The present dissertation consists of five parts:

1. Introduction
2. Four chapters:
 - I. Educational context-dependent and teacher-related factors in foreign language and pronunciation instruction.
 - II. Selected learner-dependent determinants in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation.
 - III. Phonetic progress and attainment in secondary school learners. A longitudinal study.
 - IV. Individual factors in developing teenage learners' pronunciation skills. 12 case studies.
3. Conclusion
4. References
5. Appendices

Chapter 1, which concentrates on the educational context-dependent and teacher-related factors in foreign language and pronunciation instruction and Chapter 2, in which the complexities of learner-specific determinants in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation are tackled, provide theoretical foundations for the empirical investigation presented and discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The main objective of Chapter 1 is to examine the role of educational context and teacher characteristics with a view to examining their impact on L2 pronunciation instruction in Polish secondary schools.

In order to provide the necessary background, it starts with some general regulations approved by the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg and Polish Ministry of National

Education. We consider selected socio-political aspects of language learning/teaching included in Language Education Policy Profile for Poland (e.g. the overall length of the teaching period, the number of foreign language classes in total and their frequency, language group size, international exams), the Core Curriculum (an analysis of phonetic requirements), the framework for language examinations (the structure of school-leaving exams), and finally teaching/learning facilities and materials accessible to the teacher.

In the second part of the Chapter the focus is on teacher-related factors. We look both into general teacher preparation as part of Polish university syllabi in English studies and teacher trainees' qualifications in pronunciation instruction. Next we address the issue of teacher beliefs and attitudes. Other aspects such as the teacher's experience as a language learner and the quality of the instructor's pronunciation are also delved into.

Chapter 2 sets itself the objective of presenting and discussing critically the major learner-related factors that are argued by the author to be most conducive to the acquisition of English pronunciation by Polish secondary school learners. The subsequent parts focus on an overview of 14 selected learner-dependent factors, i.e.

- (1) language aptitude, working memory and phonetic coding ability,
- (2) brain dominance,
- (3) motivation,
- (4) age,
- (5) perfectionism,
- (6) musicality,
- (7) empathy and the concept of language ego,
- (8) foreign language classroom anxiety,
- (9) willingness to communicate,
- (10) linguistic distance between L1 and L2 and the role of the native language,
- (11) cognitive and learning styles,
- (12) sociocultural factors,
- (13) learner goals and expectations,
- (14) consciousness.

Chapter 3 reports on a three-year long longitudinal study in which the phonetic progress and ultimate attainment of 12¹ randomly selected students was traced and examined.

¹ Only 12 students participated in the experiment. This is justified by our intention to carry out a detailed, in-depth, individual-oriented study, which would be impossible with more participants. The same comment concerns Chapter 4, which reports on 12 case studies.

The participants received implicit and explicit phonetic instruction from September 2015 till April 2018, i.e. throughout the span of the entire upper-secondary school cycle. The learners' pronunciation progress is evaluated on the basis of the following twelve features,² both segmental and suprasegmental:

1. the /ɪ/ vowel quality
2. the /æ/ vowel quality
3. vowel length: /ɜ:/, /eə/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɑ:/
4. the pronunciation of the palatoalveolar consonants
5. the pronunciation of the velar nasal (without a velar plosive)
6. the pronunciation of the dental fricatives
7. suppressing word-final devoicing
8. strong and weak forms
9. vowel reduction
10. word-stress placement
11. the intonation of wh-questions
12. spelling pronunciation

The learners' speech samples are analysed auditorily and acoustically in terms of the above features. The results are then displayed in the form of tables, diagrams and spectrograms providing information on the participants' phonetic progress (or lack of it) and attainment in the course of three school years. Such a procedure allows for tracing their acquisition of English pronunciation, analysing the regularities that govern the process in this group and assessing its final outcome. A detailed examination of the 12 issues in terms of learning difficulty (easy, medium, difficult), year by year, is carried out. In order to make statistically significant generalisations, various statistical procedures, such as ANOVA, Pearson's correlation, Chi², Lavene's and Tukey's test, are employed in this work.

The results are then analysed with reference to the claims made by two major models of L2 pronunciation acquisition, namely Flege's Speech Learning Model – SLM (Flege, 1995) and Best's Perceptual Assimilation Model – PAM (Best, 1995) which attempt to explain the learners' production and perception of L2 phonemes in relation to the phonemic categories found in their mother tongue.

² The choice of this feature set is dictated first and foremost by their importance for the intelligibility of Polish English pronunciation, established in several studies (e.g. Bryła-Cruz 2014).

Chapter 4 deals with selected individual factors in developing teenage learners' pronunciation skills. All the participants of the study were subjected to an in-depth examination of their profiles including the measurements of their

- (1) foreign language aptitude (phonological memory, inductive learning, phonemic coding, grammatical sensitivity and general memory),
- (2) pronunciation learning strategies,
- (3) motivation and attitude towards L2 learning,
- (4) foreign language classroom anxiety,
- (5) learning styles
- (6) introvertness / extravertness levels.

Each student was also characterized on the basis of the extensive records of their phonetic progress and achievements, but also difficulties encountered within the research period as well as their response to pronunciation training. These observations were made by the author, who was both the participants' English teacher and experimenter.

Learner features studied in this Chapter are next juxtaposed with the results reported in Chapter 3 in order to find out if there is a correlation between the individual variables under investigation and the participants' phonetic development and progress.

The Conclusion summarises the results of the dissertation and highlights its major pedagogical implications. The Appendices include a list of instruments which have been employed in the course of the experiment, detailed statistical data as well as other related materials used in our research.

The research design follows a mixed-methods format, where both quantitative and qualitative evidence is elicited. Primary data are gathered by the researcher himself through audio recordings (Chapter 3) and issuing written tests, surveys and questionnaires (Chapter 4). The main research method to achieve the objectives of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 is literature search and critical in-depth content review.

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