Correctness in pronunciation instruction:
Teachers’ and learners’ views

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Abstract
Interpreted as accuracy training rather than fluency practice, pronunciation instruction tends to be treated as an additional element of foreign language courses, not needed much, especially in a monolingual class. Taking the above statement as a departing point, this paper discusses pronunciation instruction from the perspective of the views and attitudes of the teachers, learners and users of English – Polish immigrants to the UK. The focus is on a Polish teacher and learner, in a monolingual class in an EFL context. The views of the teachers and learners are compared to those expressed by expert learners using English in an L2 environment, with an emphasis being placed on the issue of accentedness and correctness. Accepting foreign accent as an obvious reality of L2 speech, the paper argues that it is correctness that needs to be defined and operationalized for specific foreign accents to make pronunciation instruction realistic and needed. Taking pronunciation for a trip from the English classroom to the outside world and back, the paper looks for possible directions for further theoretical as well as practical solutions to the problem of specifying realistic aims for pronunciation instruction.

Keywords: pronunciation instruction; accentedness; correctness; correct pronunciation
1. Introduction

There tends to be little time for pronunciation teaching in the English classroom; when rivalled by other elements of the language system, grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation often loses ground as something unneeded to pass major language exams. Duly presented in most textbooks, it tends to stay in the boxes where the textbook writers have put it. Why should teachers and learners bother with pronunciation when there is little time and so many major elements to be mastered within other elements of the system (i.e., vocabulary and grammar) and the four skills? While the connection between pronunciation and speaking cannot be denied, the focus on fluency rather than accuracy seems to have led to the pronunciation box being locked most of the time. Undoubtedly, problems with the point of reference for pronunciation teaching, the idea of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2000, 2002) and subsequent confusion, do not help. Viewed from the learner perspective, accuracy in pronunciation may seem not needed and, consequently, not worth the trouble. This is particularly true in a monolingual English class, with the teacher and the learners sharing not only the same first language (L1) but also the same accent in their second language (L2), equated here with English, and the risk of misunderstanding caused by mispronunciation tends to be minimal. Consequently, although often dubbed “the Cinderella of ESL/EFL”, pronunciation may indeed not be regarded as troublesome or difficult in a monolingual class. The above scenario emerges from the surveys conducted among English teachers in Poland and abroad (see Section 2). Even those teachers who do teach pronunciation admit that they do not need more time for it and many of them say that it is in fact easy for their learners. Treated as an additional element, interesting and even fun, pronunciation instruction tends to be associated with accent training, and if anything, accentedness has certainly become recognized as an obvious element of L2 by educators.

What has also been recognized, however, is that the degree of accentedness varies and a foreign accent is acceptable as long as it does not inhibit intelligibility (e.g., Abercrombie, 1949; Kenworthy, 1987; Munro, 2008; Munro & Dering, 1995). Interestingly, the manual relating language examinations to the Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR 2009) mentions pronunciation explicitly only in the suggested oral task-rating grid (in two categories: phonological and intonation/stress), while accuracy in oral performance is defined with reference to grammar, not pronunciation. As mentioned above, however, it is accuracy rather than intelligibility that can be considered a possibly useful criterion for teachers in monolingual classes. With teachers sharing their L1 with the learners and coming from the same environment, the risk of real misunderstandings due to pronunciation errors can be estimated as very low even at the beginner level.
The focus on accuracy inevitably invokes the dilemma so aptly expressed by Levis (2005) as nativeness vs. intelligibility principle (see Munro & Derwing, 2015, for a review). When it is not intelligibility, but accuracy that we concentrate on in pronunciation instruction, the nativeness principle is evoked. Consequently, as accuracy is defined on the basis of differences of a particular learner’s pronunciation from that accepted as the norm (specific to a given native-speaker model), the terms accuracy and accentedness are interpreted with reference to nativeness. As expecting nativeness from EFL learners seems neither realistic nor needed, expecting (and assessing) accuracy seems equally unrealistic. But if it is not accuracy that the teacher of a monolingual class assesses, then what can be assessed? One possible answer would be correctness, but without a clear definition of the term, the point of reference and a scale, its usefulness is again highly limited. And yet we all know that in teaching practice some (mis)pronunciations will be corrected, and others will not. The learners will find some pronunciations difficult and worth practicing, while others easy and irrelevant for them. All in all, correctness in pronunciation remains somewhat enigmatic and certainly complex. In an effort to untangle this complexity, the following sections of the paper will explore the opinions of teachers, learners and expert learners – users of English. Thus, we will take pronunciation on a tour from teachers to learners, expert learners and back. The key concepts to be considered are pronunciation instruction, accuracy, accents (accentedness) and correctness.

2. English pronunciation in the classroom – teachers’ views

The attitudes towards pronunciation teaching and the practices as reported by pronunciation teachers have been explored in an English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey (EPTiES), a large-scale study undertaken by a group of pronunciation teachers and researchers from across Europe (as listed in Henderson et al., 2012: Alice Henderson, Dan Frost, Elina Tergujeff, Alexander Kautzsch, Deirdre Murphy, Anastazija Kirkova-Naskova, Ewa Waniek-Klimczak, David Levey, Una Cunningham and Lesely Curnick), representing 10 European countries: Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. The survey was designed and administered by an open-source Lime Survey, and the data were collected from February 2010 till September 2011. The results were presented in a number of publications, including Henderson et al. (2012, 2013) or Kirkova-Naskova (2013), on the basis of seven countries which contributed the minimum of 12 completed surveys, that is Finland, France, Germany, Macedonia, Poland, Spain and Switzerland. The survey included 57 questions in a closed and open format, which enquired about English pronunciation teaching (e.g., teaching methods, materials, pronunciation evaluation,
pronunciation practice outside the classroom, teacher training, teachers’ views and attitudes, the teaching context and the choice of the model/norm). The total of 843 respondents started the survey, with only 481 of them completing it. While the respondents vary in age and teaching experience, an average teacher (as shown by the median value) is 43, with about 12 years of teaching experience. The majority of the respondents teach teenagers (56%), with adults and children being taught less frequently (18% and 16%, respectively). In their practice, they rely mostly on textbooks (93%), accompanied by CDs (94%) and dictionaries (89%). They declare using DVDs (83%) and on-line materials intended for language learning, such as VOA or BBC Learning English (68%), or other on-line materials (59%), rather than podcasts (41% declare using them) or pre-existing on-line modules or courses (35%), and as few as about 15% are likely to use less conventional materials, such as blogs or forums. This can be explained by the relatively easy access teachers believe their learners have to English outside school: 73% of the teachers believe that their students have at least some opportunities to practice English in their own time (‘Are there opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom?’ Answers: ‘Yes’ – 37%, ‘No’ – 20%, ‘Some’ – 36%, ‘I don’t know’ – 7%). As part of their pronunciation instruction, teachers tend to teach learners to recognize all (51%) or some (32%) phonetic symbols, but most of the teachers do not require learners to write them (67% do not teach learners to write symbols at all and 23% teach them how to write some of them). Thus, the understanding of pronunciation as a relatively technical aspect of speaking, with a special system of representing sound, seems to be fairly widespread.

The general picture based on the median responses shows that the respondents see English as very important in relation to other languages (4.66 on a 1-5 scale), with pronunciation estimated as fairly important in relation to other language skills (3.77 on a 1-5 scale). Not surprisingly, then, the majority of teachers (70%) declare devoting from 1% to 25% of the time to pronunciation and they find teaching it particularly difficult (3.15 on a 1-5 scale). When asked whether they would like to devote more time to pronunciation teaching, most of them answered in the affirmative. However, when commenting on whether they felt the amount of time they devote to pronunciation teaching was sufficient, the participants proved to vary in their interpretation of the very term ‘pronunciation teaching’. One extreme is the assumption that pronunciation does not need to be taught on its own at all (i.e., no system-based instruction), as it is an element of speaking:¹

¹ The participants’ responses are provided in their original form, with no attempt to correct the errors they may contain.
The question is nonsense; whenever we talk we teach pronunciation.

(...I think pronunciation is just a part of the skill of speaking.

For many others, however, pronunciation remains a separate component, an element put into the accuracy-based ‘pronunciation boxes’ and safely left there (in the respondents’ own words):

(...it’s more important to get the pupils speaking than spending too much time on pronunciation.

(...although pronunciation can be important, I believe that building the students self-confidence and fluency is more important. As long as they are able to communicate and to be understood, I do not believe accents and occasional production errors are a particular problem.

It is interesting that in comment [56], pronunciation teaching seems to be interpreted as accent training, with the teacher clearly separating what can be termed model-like or correct pronunciation, from intelligibility. Other comments strengthen the impression that it is accuracy, understood in terms of the features of native-like, model pronunciation, that many teachers associate pronunciation teaching with, and that accuracy may be viewed as distinct from correctness. The very term ‘correctness’ regularly re-appears in the teachers’ comments, often in connection with vocabulary or teaching words, but also as a more general aim of pronunciation instruction:

(...pupils are able to pronounce most words correctly.

(...it’s sufficient to pronounce the words in a correct way.

(...) I think it’s necessary to teach pupils as often as possible how to pronounce words correctly if they want to be able to communicate effectively.

(...do put emphasis on correct pronunciation throughout the whole lesson.

(...) in my opinion it is vital to teach a correct pronunciation at a beginner’s to an intermediate level. Anything past that should be limited to an 'on the spot' correction, if a student makes a mistake while pronouncing new vocabulary wrong for example.

(...Pupils should be able to read new texts correctly, after having prepared them at home without the help of a teacher.

(...at the Realschul-Level a basically correct pronunciation is required, not a refined standard.

The final comment clearly states the attitude towards reference native accents – the refined standards are not what students need. At the same time, however, the majority of the teachers decide to use standard British (RP) or American English (GA) for receptive and productive work (see Henderson et al., 2013, for detailed data on accent choice). In another part of the survey, the teachers were asked about their awareness of their student goals and the extent
to which they felt their students aspired to native or near-native pronunciation. The results show that teachers, with self-assessed awareness at the level of 3.7 (1-5 scale), believe that most of their students do not aspire towards the native model often. While the average score is just above 3 (3.02, scale 1-5), responses from individual countries differ, with the highest score (3.43) for Macedonia, Switzerland (3.38) and Finland (3.17), and the lowest for Spain (2.6), Poland (2.7), France (2.9) and Germany (2.94). These results are interesting when compared to accent and pronunciation attitudinal surveys which will be discussed in the next part of the paper.

Before we leave the EPTiES data, let us consider two more comments that can shed some more light on the aims in pronunciation teaching, with native-like pronunciation, correctness and intelligibility as possible candidates. The first comment ([447]) addresses an important aspect of intelligibility in connection with accent familiarity, on the one hand, and the role of the teacher’s accent, on the other. This final aspect is of particular importance given the fact that the majority of teachers will indeed use L1-based accents themselves.

[447] I believe that more emphasis should be put on pronunciation for understanding, that is not native-like pronunciation, but clearer non-native pronunciation. I have realized that it is easier to understand a person who makes grammatical errors than it is to understand a person with a strong unfamiliar accent.

[329] (...) I do not have the impression that students would like to improve their pronunciation. Being a multilingual person myself, I think that there are other more relevant issues than pronunciation in the acquisition of English.

The final comment ([329]) brings us back to the learners, or more precisely, to the teachers’ perception of their learners’ needs. Once again, it is a particular teacher’s personal conviction that affects his or her priorities and attitudes towards pronunciation instruction. However, a direct reference to the students begs further exploration, this time from the perspective of the students themselves.

3. The aims of English pronunciation instruction – advanced learners’ views

The EPTiES data presented in the previous section reflects the views of a relatively large group of teachers involved in language instruction at different levels of proficiency and teaching learners of different ages. Their opinions seem to suggest that although pronunciation instruction is needed, its aims need to be redefined to include clearer, correct pronunciation as distinct from native-like pronunciation, which they do not consider important for their learners. Turning now to the learners themselves, we explore the results of selected studies conducted among experienced learners with an advanced level of language proficiency. There
are two reasons for choosing this specific group of learners for further discussion: firstly, they are not only the most proficient learners but also present or future regular users of English, and, secondly, the can be expected to be the most reflective.

Studies investigating the aims of pronunciation instruction among experienced learners (in most cases English majors) show that they believe pronunciation to be important (pronunciation as distinct from an accent, which is less important, see Waniek-Klimczak, 1997). When asked specifically about the accent most typical around them, i.e., L1-based foreign accent, students from such countries as Poland (Waniek-Klimczak, 2011a, Waniek-Klimczak, Porzuczek, & Rojczyk, 2013, 2015), Austria (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997) or Croatia (Smojver & Stanojevic, 2013) express negative attitudes, stressing the need not to have L1-based features in their pronunciation. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this tendency increases in more advanced learners (Smojver & Stanojevic, 2013). Advancement is also related to the expressed desire to speak like a native speaker – the nativeness principle seems to work mainly for students of English (compare e.g., students of English vs. students of social sciences in Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005), many of whom associate correctness with native-like pronunciation and declare reaching it to be their major goal in pronunciation learning (Waniek-Klimczak, 1997, Janicka, Kul, & Weckwerth, 2005, Waniek-Klimczak, Porzuczek, & Rojczyk, 2013, 2015).

Respondents in a recent large-scale study (N = 505), conducted among English majors in two areas of Poland (in the central part and in Silesia, Waniek-Klimczak, Porzuczek & Rojczyk, 2013, 2015) provide a number of reasons why pronunciation is important for them. They include intelligibility (I want to be easily understood), negative L1 accent evaluation (I don’t want to have a strong Polish accent) and emotional aspects (I don’t want to sound funny). Enrolled in the English language and literature programs at the tertiary level (universities and colleges), 94% of respondents declare a native English model to be their target in pronunciation learning. When asked about the reasons why native-like accent might matter, they choose the options presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The most often selected reasons for wanting to speak with a native-like accent (results of a Likert-scale questionnaire study; answers on a scale from 1 (don’t agree) to 5 (fully agree): mean values and standard deviations; N=505).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improving one’s image</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important for the job</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impressing interlocutors</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a perfectionist</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
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Although the tendency to associate native-like pronunciation with prestige proves to be very strong across the respondents, there is an interesting difference in the degree to which the respondents find losing elements of their L1 Polish accent important. When evaluating the statement I care about my English pronunciation NOT having features characteristic for Polish pronunciation, undergraduate students prove to be significantly more often convinced than graduate students that it matters. The effect of experience on the possible acceptance of features the Polish accent seems to be mirrored by expressed care about fully correct pronunciation (with no significant difference due to a greater variability in responses), with MA students more lenient or more realistic in terms of reaching full correctness, most likely interpreted as native-like pronunciation (Waniek-Klimczak, Porzuczek, & Rojczyk, 2013, 2015).

Native-like pronunciation remains an attractive goal for advanced students; however, as shown in the study where students were asked not only if they wanted to speak like native speakers, but also if they believed they could achieve this goal, the former does not correlate with the latter for many participants, especially non-English majors (Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005). Thus, while the nativeness principle still holds, especially for future specialists in English, it tends to be treated as theory more than practice. With pronunciation important, but even for English majors less important than vocabulary (but more than grammar in Waniek-Klimczak, 2011a, and less important than either vocabulary or grammar in Sobkowiak, 2002), the question of well-founded, realistically defined and clearly operationalized criteria for correctness in pronunciation seem to be needed.

Correctness, repeatedly invoked in empirical studies and discussions about pronunciation, remains undefined. On the one hand, it seems to be interpreted as native-like speech by highly advanced learners, future specialists in English, whose additional wish is not to have an L1 accent. On the other hand, however, experience causes these ambitions to mellow. The studies mentioned above do not make it possible to decide whether students become more realistic (i.e., they know that as adult learners they stand a very small chance of not having and L1 accent), or decide there is no need to try to sound like a native speaker of English. To explore the effect of experience further, we will now move on to the natural context for the use of English, exploring the accent attitudes in students who have graduated from English Departments with the minimum of a BA degree and have decided to settle in an English-speaking country. We shall refer to them as expert learners in an immigrant setting.
4. Expert learners as users of English

English majors from Polish universities and colleges receive considerable pronunciation instruction in the course of their studies – between 30 to 120 teaching hours of practice. As illustrated by the comments provided by the respondents in the studies cited in Section 3., the instruction is coupled with a prevailing positive attitude towards pronunciation and a strong desire to reach native-like proficiency levels, voiced by the majority of students. An intriguing question that remains to be answered is the degree to which these students may be successful in reaching their goal once they have the opportunity to practice pronunciation in a naturalistic setting. While recognizing the effect of a variety of other factors on pronunciation in an immigrant situation, there are good reasons to believe that the self-reported experience of these expert learners will be based on reflection deepened by earlier knowledge and experience, and, consequently, will provide valuable insights into the nature of accentedness in connection with pronunciation instruction, on the one hand, and correctness, on the other.

The study reported here was conducted among English majors from Poland who immigrated to the UK after 2004 and stayed there for a minimum of 6 years (see Waniek-Klimczak, 2011b, for an early report on the study). Other shared participant characteristics include further education in the UK (MA or PhD programs) and work in an English-only environment. The data were collected through Skype in the course of a semi-structured interview, during which respondents were encouraged to reflect on a number of issues related to their language experience and language attitudes. When talking about accents and their proficiency in English on arrival and at the point of the recording, they discussed the difference between the level of English pronunciation at these two points in time. The first comment by [M] explains this difference referring to the English of instruction in Poland not only as “bookish”, but also “very RP and formal”, stressing the need for fluency and more experience with different native accents, not only the RP model:

[M] Well, there is a story about that actually, because when we first came to E there was quite a shock I must say, because that local accent is quite distinguishable and hard to understand, What we studied in Poland it was mainly at school, very RP and formal, so when I started working in a call centre, well, obviously I could speak English but my friend said that I couldn’t and what he meant was that my E was not natural, it was what I call ‘bookish’ E, so I lacked this fluency and this natural flow and now it has improved so much.

The issue of accent appears in another comment, this time with reference to the local accent as well as the accent the participant spoke:
[Mr] I could experience the stages where after a couple of months it started to be come easy to understand people and then after a couple of years you sort of get to pick up the local vocab, accent and it is just easier to speak, to listen and to be understood, and it is important because many people when we came couldn’t understand us because our accents were so strong.

According to the student ([Mr]), with time and experience, the accent changes. However, as stressed by another respondent ([S]), she will always speak “with an accent” that will differentiate her from native speakers of English. The fact that their speech makes them recognized as non-native speakers does not equal problems with communication - what is needed is for the accent not to be strong ([Mr]). Additionally, it seem that the background of pronunciation instruction may not be helpful if it goes too far in practicing ‘unreal’ English ([S]) – after all, adult learners will always speak with an accent:

[S1] Regardless of the degree I had in Poland my listening comprehension was really bad, the phonetics and vocabulary that I had.... It was shocking, for the first couple of months I could barely understand anyone and English I used seemed unreal, with proper RP and proper intonation I found it strange and after a while I had to embrace the fact that I'm not an English person and I will always speak with an accent.

5. Taking pronunciation back to the classroom

The comment “I will always speak with an accent” sounds like a perfect motto for pronunciation instruction: no matter what we do, how very diligent we are as students and how very strict in terms of accuracy we may be as teachers, we – adult L2 learners – will most likely always speak with an accent. We need to realize it and endorse it as an element of our language and life experience. After all, as research findings show, pronunciation reflects the language experience of learners, and while the earlier the learner experiences the L2 sound system the better, this varied experience will affect the formation of the sound system in L2 (e.g., Flege & Liu, 2001; Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). Translated into the classroom reality, this means the need for exposure to a variety of English accents, with native accents of English forming the natural core for the formation of the system in a non-native speaker. The dichotomy between native vs. non-native speakers, while possibly useful in limiting the amount of variability presented to the learners, may not be of great importance once the core system corresponding to the correctness of pronunciation is specified.

When taking pronunciation back to the classroom, we need to learn important lessons from the teachers, advanced learners and expert learners in an immigrant setting. The first ones say that pronunciation is generally easy; however,
they do recognize the fact that their learners need correct pronunciation to communicate; nativeness is not an issue there at all. However, the concept of native-like pronunciation remains strong in the pronunciation practice at the tertiary level at least, where the models (RP or GA) are still preached. The usefulness of these models does not need to be questioned as long as we decide that nativeness and correctness are not necessarily synonymous, and just as accentedness does not need to inhibit comprehensibility (e.g., Munro & Derwing, 1995), accentedness does not need to inhibit correctness. In other words, what remains to be established is the system of sound categories, the production of which ensures communication. The exact phonetic value of these categories will reflect the L1 characteristics plus the language experience of the speaker; however, the fact that the sound categories will be implemented at the contrastive level will ensure communication.

There is nothing new in the proposed solution to the correctness/nativeness dichotomy: it refers to the well-known phonetic category specification, with the linguistic phonetics approach (Ladefoged, 1971, 1997) making it possible to grasp the difference between a linguistically significant difference in the phonetic realization of the sound and a linguistically insignificant one. In this view, accentedness does not need to inhibit correctness if we agree that what is meant by ‘correct’ is the use of system-specific categories; however, the phonetic realization of these categories may differ depending on the language experience of the learner. The accent experience is crucial here – as stressed by expert learners with the experience of immigration, the lack of experience with different accents caused considerable difficulty in communication in a natural environment. Pronunciation instruction then needs to focus on sound categories in production, with the contrast being crucial, not the realization.

6. Conclusion

The inevitability of a foreign accent arises from learner experience: there is nothing wrong with it as long as specific features of the accent are described and specified for their possible effect on the use of sound categories in English. In fact, in a monolingual class, a foreign accent is a reality. However, the degree of the accent and its specific features vary. Clearly then, pronunciation instruction needs to address the needs of a specific group of learners, recognizing their language experience. The theoretical basis is offered by linguistic phonetics as applied to non-native accents; what we need is a research-based set of guidelines for sound categories and their realization. Once correctness is defined in terms of the recognition and production of sound categories, it forms a solid foundation for realistic and successful pronunciation instruction.
References


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