

'THE COURSE SHOULD BE OBLIGATORY!':
ATTITUDES OF POLISH FUTURE EFL TEACHERS TOWARDS
A COURSE ON PRONUNCIATION TEACHING

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To help EFL students reach a level of international comfortable intelligibility, we need teachers who know how to teach pronunciation during integrated-skills courses of English at all levels of education. Several observations, however, show that teachers do not feel confident and competent in this area. It seems that general courses of FL teaching are insufficient, and classes focusing exclusively on pronunciation teaching are necessary for teachers to gain adequate knowledge and skills to be able to teach pronunciation to their learners. Next to objective data verifying the effectiveness of such training, we should also examine future teachers' perceptions of such courses, i.e. whether they consider them helpful and needed. As a response to this need, the paper presents results of a study exploring the opinions and attitudes of Polish teacher trainees towards an on-line course on pronunciation teaching they participated in. With the use of a draw-a-picture technique, questionnaires and interviews, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered among BA and MA students. They supported the fact that prior to the course, the participants' confidence and competence in pronunciation teaching was (very) low. Their knowledge related to and attitudes towards pronunciation teaching improved significantly after the classes. Many of the subjects claimed that such courses should be obligatory for all FL (future) teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, the ability to speak foreign languages (FLs), particularly English, perceived as a lingua franca, is a must. Consequently, there is no doubt that most FL learners aim, first and foremost, at communicative competence. The ability to communicate effectively is also stressed as a primary goal in formal educational documents, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2013) and local FL programs and curricula across the globe. Although contemporary empirical data leave no doubt that pronunciation is one of the crucial elements that determines intelligibility (e.g., Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2016), pronunciation instruction in the classroom is still introduced rarely and often unprofessionally (Baran-Łucarz, 2021; Henderson et al., 2012). Why is this so? To answer the question, a closer look at programs designed by institutions training FL teachers is needed. Observations carried out by experts on pronunciation teaching clearly reveal that for several decades, training in pronunciation teaching offered to future teachers has been neglected in many countries, introduced usually 'by-the-way', when discussing the teaching of speaking or listening (Murphy, 2014). For example, Murphy (2014, p. 196) found that "Pre-service ESL teachers across the US need considerably more support in

how to teach pronunciation.” An analogous conclusion was drawn by Burgess and Spencer (2000), whose participants of adult ESL programs in Great Britain “were requesting more and higher quality training in how to teach pronunciation (Murphy, 2014, p. 196-197).” Lack of sufficient support on pronunciation teaching offered in MA programs and in-service trainings has also been reported by Canadian specialists (e.g., Breitzkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2001; Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2011). Last but not least, complaints about having received little or no training in how to help learners with their English pronunciation were also recorded by Henderson et al. (2012) among EFL teachers from several European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Macedonia, Poland, Spain and Switzerland). Among the causes for FL teachers not feeling adequately prepared to teach pronunciation was the lack of courses in teacher training programs that focused exclusively on pronunciation pedagogy. Organizational difficulties, e.g. a lack of qualified instructors or curricular issues, may explain some of this. Unfortunately, the rationale for not planning such preparation for FL teacher trainees may also reveal a lack of conviction about the legitimacy of such a course. Baker (2011), however, leaves no doubts about its importance, stressing that “training programs (e.g., MATESOL) that feature at least one course dedicated to the teaching of pronunciation is the single factor most likely to have an impact on teacher’s knowledge of and confidence in teaching pronunciation” (c.f. Murphy, 2014, p. 201). However, the teacher trainees' own perceptions about the usefulness of such a course is also an important factor to consider. Thus, this paper reports opinions and attitudes of future English teachers on a pronunciation pedagogy course they had taken part in.

What FL teachers need to know to teach pronunciation

According to Murphy (2014), to be able to teach pronunciation confidently and competently, future teachers should be equipped with knowledge in three areas. The first one concerns the *L1 and L2 phonological systems*. More specifically, it is necessary that FL teachers know the articulatory characteristics and the similarities and differences between the segmental and suprasegmental features of the target language (TL) and mother tongue (L1) of their potential future students. Secondly, they need a solid grasp of *second language acquisition* (SLA), particularly of the theories related to speech perception and production, theories on errors in pronunciation, the critical period hypothesis, and individual learner differences important for pronunciation learning/acquisition (e.g., age, cognitive, affective, personality factors). Thirdly, it is essential that teacher trainees are provided with information related specifically to *pronunciation teaching*, such as why to practice pronunciation, when and how to do it, which aspects to focus on depending on the students’ L1. Such prioritizing is difficult to achieve without an understanding of the concept of functional load (Munro & Derwig, 2006), and the differences between accentedness and intelligibility/comprehensibility. Part of the knowledge on pronunciation teaching is also knowing where to find teaching materials, how to design activities on your own, how to use modern technology for pronunciation training, how to assess and give feedback, and how to encourage students to reflect and lead them to more autonomous practice. It seems to me that in addition to receiving adequate theory in these three areas, FL teacher trainees should be provided with a chance to develop their practical pronunciation teaching skills. Finally, it is crucial to examine and shape future teachers’ cognitions (perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, understanding) related to pronunciation teaching, since the influence of these cognitions on actual teaching has been found to be potentially more important than teachers’ actual knowledge and skills (Murphy, 2014).

The first two areas of knowledge are usually developed during courses in phonetics, phonology, descriptive grammar, and SLA, which are obligatory at many institutions training

FL teachers. However, it is difficult to ‘squeeze in’ the necessary information about pronunciation teaching, and to develop the related skills and perceptions during a general course of FL teaching. At the University of Wrocław (Institute of English Studies), a course devoted exclusively to pronunciation pedagogy is taught occasionally, depending on the teaching load of the author of this paper. Such courses were held, among others, in the academic year 2020/2021, forming the dataset for this article.

Research questions

The aim of this paper is to share survey data from students who participated in a course on pronunciation teaching (CoPT). The data are all related to the participants’ personal perceptions and opinions, and provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) How did the teacher trainees perceive their confidence, competence and skills related to pronunciation teaching before the course on pronunciation teaching?
- 2) From the perspective of the teacher trainees, have their confidence, competence, skills, attitude and approach to pronunciation teaching changed after the course on pronunciation teaching?
- 3) Did the teacher trainees find the course helpful and effective? Why (not)?
- 4) How important do the teacher trainees consider the course on pronunciation teaching for (future) FL teachers?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 15 BA students (14 females/1 male; 14 Polish students/1 Russian student) and 19 MA students (14 females/5 males; 16 Polish students/3 Spanish students), who chose the CoPT from among several electives. Both groups had completed courses in practical phonetics (90 hs), phonology (30hs), descriptive grammar (30 hs), SLA (30 – 60 hs), psycho-pedagogy (240 hs), and FL teaching (BA students – 135 hs; MA students – 165 hs). Additionally, both groups had already done some teaching apprenticeships before the CoPT (BA students – 60 hs in primary schools; MA students – 90hs in primary schools and 60 hours in high schools). According to the curriculum, about 2 hours are devoted exclusively to pronunciation teaching during the theoretical FL teaching course. More attention is to be drawn to practical skills of pronunciation teaching during the teaching apprenticeship, but whether this indeed is the case depends on the personal interests and competencies of the teacher trainers and FL teachers cooperating with the university. Most of the participants declared to be planning to become English teachers (85%); some of them had already been doing private teaching prior to the course (60%).

Treatment

Since the courses took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were conducted in the online mode with the use of Microsoft TEAMS. In both the BA and MA courses the classes were held every week and lasted 90 minutes. Although the MA course was initially planned as a revision of the key theoretical issues related to pronunciation teaching, in order to move quickly forward and devote more time to practical tasks, the initial data collected with a pre-treatment questionnaire made it clear that the students lacked basic competence on pronunciation teaching. Consequently, both the BA and MA courses had a very similar content and structure. Following the recommendation of Murphy (2014), the courses were

aimed at developing the knowledge of trainees' in the third area, with particular attention drawn to the concepts of accentedness and intelligibility/comprehensibility, functional load, as well as why, what, when and how to teach pronunciation. Diverse tasks were used in the hope of improving trainees' competence in these areas, for example reading tasks (contemporary publications and book chapters), teacher and student presentations, guided group discussions and opinion sharing. To put theory into practice, despite students being unable to try actual teaching in the classroom, they did several obligatory practical group projects and tasks, such as coursebook analysis, lesson planning and modifying, microteaching, searching for and designing exercises, and/or preparing syllabi, all focused on pronunciation. The space limitations of this paper preclude detailed descriptions of the tasks and the opinions of the participants about their usefulness, advantages, difficulties and limitations, which are intended to be reported in a separate article.

Instruments and data collection and analysis procedures

The students invited to take part in the research were informed about its general aim and about their participation in the study being optional. They knew they could withdraw at any stage of data collection. All agreed to the use and sharing of the data provided by them for scientific purposes in papers and conference presentations.

The first instrument filled out anonymously by the participants was a questionnaire with a 7-point Likert scale, complemented by a few open questions. The BA students filled out only a post-treatment questionnaire after the course; however, it covered the perceptions, opinions and competence referring to pronunciation teaching that they had both before and after the course. The MA participants, on the other hand, completed two analogous surveys - one before and one after the course. The questionnaires required from students to assess their level of confidence, competence and skills related to pronunciation teaching (in the case of MA students – in comparison to the teaching abilities of other FL abilities and aspects) on the Likert scale (e.g., *'How would you assess your level of confidence in pronunciation teaching BEFORE the course?'*, *'How would you assess your ability to design your own pronunciation exercises AFTER the course?'*). Examples of open questions were as follows: *'Why did you choose this elective?'*, *'Did you find the course helpful and/or effective? Why (not)?'*, *'Do you consider such a course important for (future) teachers. Why (not)?'*

Additionally, a few BA students agreed to be interviewed on TEAMS at the end of the semester. So as to make the collected qualitative data more reliable, initially only very general questions were asked about their observations and opinions, perceived progress as future FL teachers, difficulties and potential benefits from various classes they had attended in the semester that was just ending (the interviewer – author of this paper – was not only the participants' instructor in the course on pronunciation teaching but also their teacher trainer for the course in practical FL teaching.) Among the questions were the following: *'Did you find any courses particularly interesting and informative? Why? Do you think they changed your competence, skills, approach to teaching?'* Only once the participants referred to the CoPT themselves during the interview (and all of them did), more specific questions were asked about this particular course and their pronunciation teaching self-perceptions.

In the MA group, besides the pre- and post-treatment questionnaires, a draw-a-picture technique (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018) was used before the course. The task of the participants was to draw anything that came to their mind in reference to pronunciation teaching. This set of data was not anonymous since the pictures were sent to the researcher via

chat on TEAMS. Moreover, the authors of a few pictures were invited to talk to the teacher, commenting on and further explaining their drawings. Finally, the information gathered with the post-treatment questionnaire was supplemented with qualitative data collected via a focused group discussion held at the end of the course.

The responses on the Likert-scale were changed into points from 1 (*very low*) to 6 (*very high*), and means and standard deviations for the responses before and after the course were computed. The qualitative data (pictures, excerpts in interviews and answers to open questions) were coded by the author inductively, and verified and agreed on with an external researcher. Then, tendencies were identified and in further analysis turned into percentages.

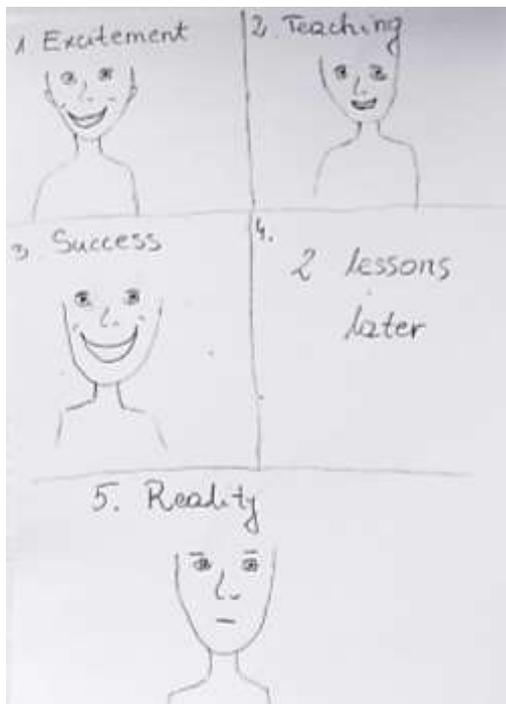
RESULTS

The first RQ focused on the teacher trainees' perception of their confidence, competence and skills related to pronunciation teaching before the course on pronunciation teaching, focusing on the level of the trainees' confidence, competence and skills related to pronunciation teaching before the CoPT. This RQ could be addressed by the participants' explanations for why they chose the course as their elective. In 92% of the responses, the participants referred to their lack of confidence caused by their low level of knowledge and poor pronunciation teaching skills (e.g., *'I knew that as a future teacher I needed to know all the details about how and when to teach pronunciation. I knew I lacked knowledge in this area and this made me feel insecure and kind of bad.'* [P6BA]; *'I want to be a teacher and I know that pronunciation tends to be neglected at schools. I never had any good experience when pronunciation teaching is concerned, so I wanted to learn how to avoid mistakes in this area.'* [P11BA])

The drawings by the MA students often expressed a similar negative connotation (63%), suggesting their uncertainty (e.g., question marks, sad or angry faces, thunderstorms). Below is a picture (Figure 1 - A) of one of the participants [P9MA], who in the interview added, *'I have always wanted to practice pronunciation with my students. When I finally tried, I realised I wasn't effective. They were not progressing as I had expected... Actually, I'm not sure if I should have focused more on sounds or words, devoted more time to repetition... I chose those aspects I myself felt confident with, but maybe that wasn't the best choice.'* Very much in the same vein, another MA participant [P2MA] said the following, as a clarification to the picture he/she drew (Figure 1 - B): *'The change of my pronunciation after the course of phonetics was absolutely fascinating and I would like to know how to help my students improve this aspect, too. I'm not quite sure yet how to do this.'*

Figure 1

Picture responses provided before the CoPT for the prompt: 'Draw anything that comes to your mind when you think of pronunciation teaching.', by participants [P9MA] (A) and [P2MA] (B).



A



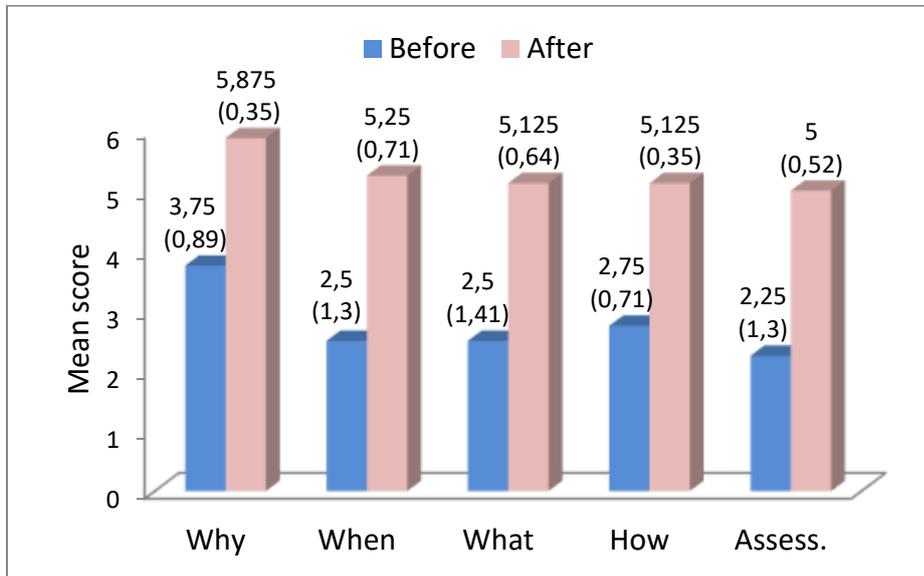
B

The qualitative information gathered via pictures and interviews about the MA students' level of competence and practical abilities to teach pronunciation align with the quantitative data collected with the questionnaire. When asked 'How would you assess your competence and actual skills of teaching?', while grammar, vocabulary, productive and receptive skills had means from 4.2 to 4.6 (*rather high*) and SDs from 0.76 to 1.23, the mean for pronunciation was 3.1 (*rather low*). In this case, the SD was relatively high (2.1), with some participants choosing the answers *low* and *very low*, and only a few felt their competence was *rather high*.

Figure 2 displays the data relevant to research question 2, concerning BA participants' self-assessed level of knowledge before and after the CoPT, on why to teach pronunciation, how and when to do it, which aspects to focus on and how to assess pronunciation. The change is evident from an average of 2.5 to 3.75 before the course to 5 – 5.87 after the course, with the most popular answers being *low/rather low* before the course and *high/very high* after the course. The standard deviations (digits in parentheses) show that the students were more homogeneous in their responses after the course than before it, which lends further support to the influence of the training for all participants. Analogous tendencies were observed in the case of MA students, whose self-assessment of their knowledge and skills increased from an average of 3.2 (*rather low*) (SD=1.35) to 5.76 (almost *very high*) (SD=0.89).

Figure 2

BA participants' self-perceived level of competence related to pronunciation teaching before and after the CoPT

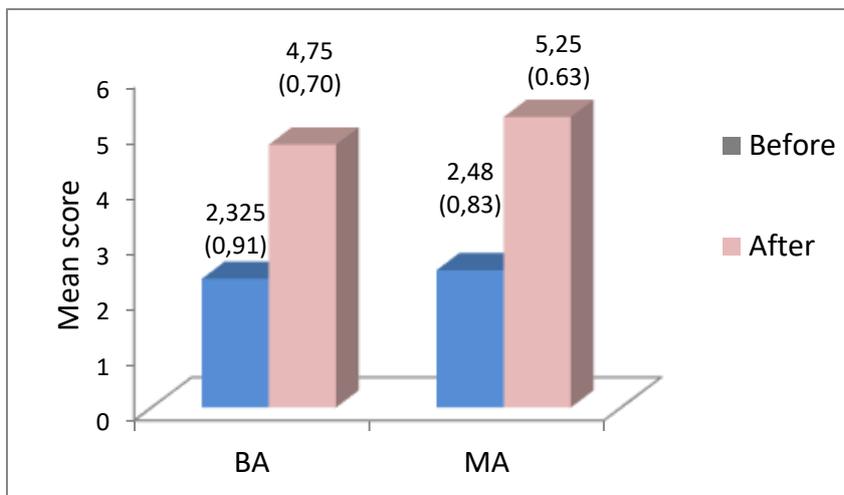


Note. (0 – don't know; 1 – very low; 2 – low; 3 - rather low; 4 – rather high; 5 – high; 6 – very high)

Although the growth of competence can be assumed to lead to higher confidence in teaching, whether it indeed changed is represented by answers to a direct question about confidence before and after the CoPT. The results displayed by Figure 3 show that the levels of confidence grew from *low/rather low* to (almost) *high*. As before, the SD was lower after the CoPT.

Figure 3

BA participants' level of confidence related to pronunciation teaching before and after the CoPT

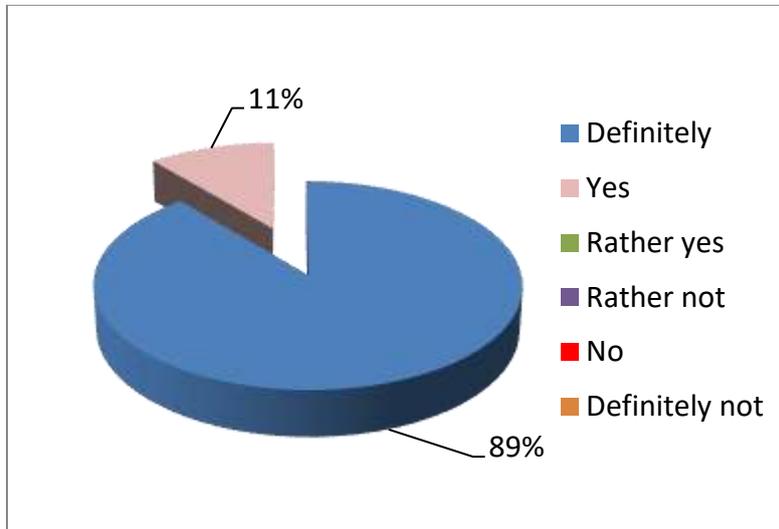


Note. (0 – don't know; 1 – very low; 2 – low; 3 - rather low; 4 – rather high; 5 – high; 6 – very high).

Moreover, both BA and MA participants declared they would teach pronunciation in their future classrooms; results for BA participants are shown below in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Distribution of answers to the question ‘If you teach English in the future, will you practice pronunciation regularly with your students?’ provided by BA participants



Responses to open questions about the value of the course (whether it was helpful and/or effective) confirm the Likert-scale data presented above. All the answers were positive, with 90% of the participants claiming that they gained knowledge about when to teach pronunciation (e.g., ‘Thanks to our meetings I know now in which stages of a lesson to focus on pronunciation.’ [P12MA]), 85% - how to teach it (e.g., ‘I’ve learnt a lot of new things about teaching and evaluating pronunciation in a language classroom.’ [P12BA], ‘Pronunciation teaching is more complex and I know now that it can be introduced in many interesting ways.’ [P4MA]), and 80% - what to teach (e.g., ‘Now I know what is really important and that I don’t have to focus on so many aspects.’ [P5BA]). One of the respondents provided the following explanation: ‘I wanted to learn more about how to teach pronunciation, when and why and these classes helped me a lot in this matter because all these questions were answered.’ [P11MA]. As many as 90% of all the participants claimed their confidence in this area evidently grew, while 85% mentioned a positive change in their attitudes to pronunciation teaching and determination to do it (e.g., ‘I’ve learnt to overcome my barriers. I’ve realised that teacher’s lack of competence cannot be the source of depriving learners of important practice.’ [P2BA], ‘Even if preparing interesting pronunciation tasks for my potential students would take a few days, I’d go for it!’ [P10MA], ‘I know I don’t have to sound like a native speaker and still teach pronunciation effectively.’ [P17MA]).

Finally, with regard to research question 4 (How important do the teacher trainees consider the course on pronunciation teaching for (future) FL teachers?), in interviews and focused group discussions, all of the respondents stressed that it is vital for FL teachers to take a CoPT. In the space provided for comments on improving the course, several students stated: ‘It should be obligatory for all FL (future) teachers!’ [P1MA].

DISCUSSION

The data gathered in this study show that, despite the sound preparation the participants had received in phonetics, phonology, descriptive grammar, SLA, and FL teaching, and numerous hours of teaching apprenticeship, they still perceived as insufficient their level of knowledge, confidence and practical skills related to pronunciation teaching. These results lend support to earlier calls by specialists in pronunciation pedagogy (Baker, 2011; Murphy, 2014) for the need to provide future teachers with courses focusing explicitly on pronunciation teaching. It is alarming that CoPTs are still rarely offered, if at all, in programs for future teachers in some countries (e.g., Poland). As Reed (2021) has recently suggested, maybe calling the courses *intelligibility courses/training* would convince more authorities responsible for planning or designing curricula for future FL teachers to add them to the teaching programs.

According to the participants, the course, even delivered entirely online due to the pandemic, was very helpful and effective, since it allowed them to gain the knowledge they had been lacking and to develop practical skills related to pronunciation teaching. It also increased their confidence to implement pronunciation instruction in future teaching. Moreover, from the perspective of many of them, such a course *'is a must for all FL teachers'* [P12BA]. It must, however, be considered that the positive changes reported by the students are their subjective perceptions, which might have been shaped by extraneous variables, such as the halo effect or subject expectancy. A wide range of objective data verifying the effectiveness of such courses might carry more weight for the decision-makers in charge of FL teacher education.

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