PRONUNCIATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNSHIP REPORTS

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This pilot study analyzed internship reports written by seven pre-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Brazil with the purpose of investigating the student teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices regarding pronunciation. Data analysis involved reading through the reports and coding the excerpts in which pronunciation was addressed. These codes were then collapsed into four broader themes (Creswell, 2012): *identifying problems*, *explaining problems*, *dealing with problems,* and *expressing beliefs*. The findings suggest that the student teachers had unclear knowledge of the phonologies of English and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and that they were not fully aware of the reasons behind common pronunciation errors made by Brazilian EFL learners. Overall, pronunciation was taught mainly through modelling and repetition, and greater attention was given to segments or individual words. These results differ from previous research findings in ESL settings, where teachers reported using more varied techniques and teaching a combination of segmentals and suprasegmentals (Breitkreutz, Derwing, & Rossiter, 2001; Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). They also suggest that the pre-service teachers in Brazil were not adequately prepared to teach pronunciation, which might point to a flaw in their university education.

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that research and practice do not always walk hand-in-hand. In education, this discrepancy can be quite large, since many practitioners are unaware of the latest research findings or do not know how to apply them in their classrooms (Borg, 2009). Studies investigating teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices can provide valuable information about the reality of education in a given area and may help to identify problems that require urgent attention. In the domain of L2 pronunciation, however, research on teachers' cognitions and classroom practices is scarce (Baker & Murphy, 2011). Thus, it is still unclear how recently renewed interest in pronunciation has influenced teachers worldwide, especially in EFL settings. Fortunately, research aimed at answering this question is growing, and this study provides a contribution.

PRONUNCIATION INSTRUCTION AND TEACHERS' BELIEFS

For over a decade, researchers have identified a need for more teacher training opportunities in pronunciation, as many instructors do not feel completely comfortable teaching it in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom (Baker, 2011; Foote et al., 2011; Macdonald, 2002). Yet some studies suggest that ESL teachers' beliefs and practices are generally in line with current pronunciation research, at least in North America and in the UK. For example, ESL instructors have been found to value pronunciation teaching at all proficiency levels and to regard intelligibility as a more appropriate goal than accent reduction (Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Foote et al., 2011). Regarding teaching practices, Baker (2011) concluded that research on pronunciation strongly influenced the teaching of five of the six instructors in Canada and the USA. These teachers tended to prioritize prosodic features, according to what they had learned in their

graduate education programs. The surveys conducted by Breitkreutz et al. (2001) and Foote et al. (2011) found that Canadian teachers reported teaching both segmental and suprasegmental features and using pronunciation textbooks in their classes. In Foote et al. (2011), the instructors mentioned using a variety of techniques and resources that they considered effective for improving learners' pronunciation, including games with minimal pairs, repetition, mirrors, visual aids, and tactile reinforcement. Although most of these activities worked primarily on segmentals, working on intonation was considered important, and several suprasegmental features were mentioned as problematic for ESL learners (Foote et al., 2011). Similarly, British teachers questioned by Burgess and Spencer (2000) reported making use of a number of strategies to deal with pronunciation problems, including the phonemic alphabet, drills, chanting, drama, and role-play. Suprasegmental features like intonation and stress were seen as highly important, as well as certain segmental aspects (e.g., voicing, schwa, clustering, and linkage phenomena) and their relationship to suprasegmentals. Stress, rhythm, and intonation were regarded as main areas of difficulty for students.

To date, little is known about pronunciation teaching in the numerous countries where English is taught as a foreign language (i.e., countries where English is not a primary language). In typical EFL contexts, learners share the same L1 and have fewer opportunities to speak the target language in real-world situations or to interact with native speakers. EFL teachers usually do not have the challenge of dealing with multilingual groups, but they certainly have other difficulties to face. In EFL settings like Brazil, the vast majority of teachers are non-native English speakers. One could speculate that the teachers' own difficulties with some aspects of oral English could make them uncomfortable in teaching pronunciation. Another important aspect mentioned by Derwing (2008) is that students who share the same L1 can sometimes be more intelligible to one another when speaking the foreign language. Thus, they might need less effort to make themselves understood and could create a distorted idea of how clearly they speak. Even teachers who share the students' L1 may be subject to this false impression. These and other particularities of EFL settings might have implications for teachers' views and practices concerning pronunciation. However, most research conducted with non-native instructors has focused almost exclusively on beliefs, particularly on their attitudes toward native models and accented speech. An interesting finding in such studies is that non-native teachers appear to have contradictory opinions. While they admire native pronunciation as an ideal, they also recognize the central role of intelligibility (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005; Timmis, 2002) and they understand that accent is an important marker of L1 identity (Jenkins, 2005).

A recent project that has examined EFL teachers' attitudes and classroom practices is the English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey (EPTiES). According to preliminary findings published by Henderson et al. (2012), teachers from seven European countries attributed high importance to pronunciation and rated their own pronunciation favourably. Results of the EPTiES for Finland revealed that most instructors from that country taught learners to recognize phonetic symbols and used at least some ear training as part of their pronunciation teaching (Tergujeff, 2012a). A case study conducted by Tergujeff (2012b) found that Finnish teachers emphasized segmental features and adopted traditional pronunciation teaching practices. The main activities used by the four instructors observed were listen and repeat tasks, and teachers often corrected their learners or pointed out the correct pronunciation of words. Read-aloud tasks and phonemic script were sometimes used by two of the teachers, but other types of activities were rare.

Similar research in other EFL settings is clearly warranted. The current study partially addresses this gap by investigating the cognition and practices of pre-service EFL teachers in Brazil. The main research questions are the following:

1. What pronunciation teaching practices do the student teachers report using?

2. What beliefs regarding pronunciation teaching and learning do they express?

3. How much knowledge do they demonstrate of English pronunciation, pronunciation instruction, and the main difficulties experienced by Brazilian EFL learners?

While previous studies have typically used surveys, questionnaires, and interviews to elicit responses from teachers, this study analyzed internship reports. The rationale behind this choice is that internship reports can provide contextualized information about student teachers' practices and cognition. In addition, the participants did not know in advance that the researcher was interested in pronunciation, so they were not necessarily prompted to include it in their practices and reflections.

METHOD

Participants and Materials

The data used in the study was made available to the researcher by a federal university in the South of Brazil. It consisted of seven internship reports written by last-year undergraduates studying in a Portuguese and EFL teacher education program. The internship supervisor, a tenured faculty member at the university, provided information about the undergraduate program and the teaching internships. The researcher was also given access to the program flowchart and to the course outline with the guidelines given to the students for the write-up of their teaching internship reports.

The undergraduate program is four years long and provides students with a broad background in Portuguese, English, language teaching, and literature. A significant portion of the course load consists of EFL classes, as many students enter the program with low proficiency in English. These classes and the courses in EFL teaching offered in the program are largely based on the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). The student teachers in this study had taken a sixty-hour course in phonetics and phonology in their first year. They also received some instruction and guidance on how to teach oral skills within more general courses, such as Applied Linguistics, but pronunciation teaching was not covered specifically.

The teaching internship was a mandatory component of the program. It consisted of one semester of supervised EFL teaching covering the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). One participant taught a group of teenagers aged 16 to 17 at a local private high school, while the others taught mostly young adults taking part in non-credit courses offered by the university to the community. The average group size was 15 learners (range: 9-20), all native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese (BP) and beginners in English. Although this was their first official teaching internship in the program, all of the student teachers had previous English teaching experience (e.g., at private language schools).

The internship reports covered 18 to 20 hours (i.e., approximately one month) of teaching in the middle of the course. That is, although the student teachers taught an entire semester, they focused their reports on this one month of teaching, a period that had been assigned by the internship supervisor for evaluation purposes. The reports included lesson plans and descriptions

of each class, as well as critical reflections. The evaluation criteria regarding the content of the reports were the following: (1) critical reflection on teaching practices with reference to relevant theory and literature, (2) clarity of assessment criteria, and (3) reflection and discussion about learners' main language "errors/problems." The student teachers were told not only to describe their practices and their learners' performance, but to justify the former and discuss possible reasons for the latter from an informed perspective. The reports were written in BP and their average length was 47 pages, excluding appendices (e.g., photocopied activities from books, learners' homework, marks, etc.).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the inductive procedure described in Creswell (2012). After an initial exploratory analysis of the entire reports, the researcher located all the text segments about pronunciation and coded them for emerging topics. These codes were then collapsed into four broader themes: *identifying problems*, *explaining problems*, *dealing with problems,* and *expressing beliefs*, which are explained and illustrated in the next section. In order to ensure confidentiality, each teacher is referred to with a number (from T1 to T7). Direct citations have been translated into English by the author.

RESULTS

The preliminary exploratory analysis revealed that all of the student teachers mentioned pronunciation in their internship reports. However, the number of references to the topic varied considerably, ranging from only two short passages (T4, T5) to as many as 21 passages (T7). Together, the comments related to pronunciation totalled 3,652 words. The main findings of the analysis are presented by theme below.

Identifying Problems

All of the teachers but one (T4) reported that their students experienced pronunciation difficulties at some point during the course. Yet numerous times they did not explain what these problems were, only mentioning generically that students had "many difficulties with pronunciation" (T3, T6, T7) or that "some/many pronunciation problems" were observed during specific oral activities (T1, T2, T3). Two teachers referred to "serious" (T1, T7) and "normal" (T7) pronunciation problems without indicating what these terms meant (for example, whether they thought an error was serious because it could hinder communication or whether another problem was considered normal because of specific features in the students' L1).

On the other hand, some problems were commented on more specifically. Three things were reported as particularly challenging: the *th* sound /θ/ in ordinal numbers (T1, T3), /r/ in word-initial position (T3, T6), and the *-ed* inflectional endings for regular verbs in the past tense (T1). Teacher 1 also mentioned that her students pronounced *were* like *where*, and Teacher 2 listed 11 words that her learners mispronounced with phonetic transcriptions of how they pronounced them. The epenthesis of [i] was observed at the end of some of these words (e.g., *gave* being pronounced as [geɪvi]), and Teacher 2 specifically mentioned this feature as a common problem in her learners' speech. Teacher 6 noticed the same phenomenon when her students pronounced the word *band*, for example. Only Teacher 7 identified fluency and intonation as troublesome aspects. In particular, he noticed that some students' reading was monotonous because they did not use proper intonation.

In many cases, however, the teachers referred to problematic words without identifying where exactly the problems lay. For example, they said "there was difficulty with the pronunciation of *you're welcome*" (T6), "I noticed difficulty… in the pronunciation of the parts of the body, such as *thumb*, *ankle* and *knee*, among others" (T5), and "some problems appeared… regarding the pronunciation of health problems" (T1). It is unclear whether the teachers were aware of the difficulties and just did not report them or if they only had a general impression that something was wrong in their learners' pronunciation.

Explaining Problems

Even when the student teachers were able to pinpoint pronunciation difficulties, they did not usually attempt to explain their causes. Unfortunately, the explanations that could be found were generally vague or flawed. On three occasions, the teachers simply attributed the errors to transfer or to "the influence of Portuguese" (T2, T5), without further elucidation. Another common claim was that students' difficulties were caused by the differences between the sounds of English and BP (T2, T3, T6). In reality, however, other factors could account for the errors, including different syllable structure and opaque orthography.

Some student teachers seemed to overgeneralize problems and to mix up the concepts of sounds and letters in their explanations. For example, Teacher 2 wrote that "many students tend to put an [ɪ] sound at the end of words ending in consonants or in the vowel [e], because of the influence of Portuguese." Actually, epenthesis does not occur in all words ending in consonants, as BP admits some consonants in word-final positions: /l/, /r/, /N/, and /s/. Thus, Brazilian EFL learners will often add an [i] at the end of words like *dog* and *map* (i.e., they will say [dɑgi] and [mæpi]), but not after *miss* or *car*, for example. Moreover, epenthesis would never occur after vowel sounds such as [e]. It is likely that the teacher was actually referring to words that end in a silent letter "e" such as *time* and *because*. In these cases, orthographic interference causes learners to pronounce the final vowel. Confusion is also observed in the following comment by Teacher 3:

> The other [learner] has more specific problems, like sounds that we do not use in Portuguese, such as the sound of 'r' at the beginning of words, the sound of 'th', and the sound of 's' with the sound of 'j', as in the word *usually*, which are characteristic of the English language.

The retroflex /r/ is not present at all in most dialects of BP. The reason why its pronunciation can be especially tricky in word-initial position is because BP speakers produce a fricative r-sound that is similar to /h/ for words beginning in "r". Thus, EFL beginners from Brazil might pronounce the words *rat* and *hat* identically. As for words like *usually*, the main difficulty is that the spelling will induce learners to pronounce /z/ instead of /ʒ/. (In BP, intervocalic "s" is pronounced as /z/.) Nonetheless, /ʒ/ cannot be considered characteristic of the English language, as it is quite common in BP for words written with "j" or "g" followed by "e" and "i". Although Teacher 3 did not express clear awareness of the influence of orthography in the comment above, she did mention that another learner read English words "exactly as they are written, as if she was reading in Portuguese." A similar observation was made by Teacher 6, who noticed that her learners tended to read the word *favourite* "as it is written, pronouncing an [i] at the end." In this word, both the spelling and the final consonant sound may cause the production of epenthesis by Brazilian learners.

Dealing with Problems

When the teachers talked about their instructional practices, very generic descriptions were often used. Rather than describing specific strategies or activities, they would frequently say, for instance, that they did "thorough/intense work on pronunciation" (T1), "focused on pronunciation" (T3), or "helped the students with pronunciation" (T6). Whenever an activity was mentioned, it usually involved listening and repeating the target structure. Teacher 1, for example, said she had to "work arduously on repetition" in order to improve students' pronunciation of certain words. Teacher 3 mentioned having students repeat the *th* many times until most of them got it right. According to Teacher 7, students practiced intonation and stress by imitating a recording and repeating sentences many times. Besides these, several other references to repetition were found in the internship reports. In total, there were 14 mentions of repetition in eight text segments and four reports.

Another very common practice, mentioned eight times and by five teachers, was to have learners read texts and dialogs aloud. During these tasks, the teacher would often monitor and correct students' pronunciation. Teacher 4, for instance, asked her group to read a conversation in pairs and "pay attention to pronunciation and intonation." Then, she walked around the classroom correcting the problems she observed in each pair. It is possible that the teacher did this by simply providing the students with the target-like pronunciation, but this was not clearly described in the report. Read-aloud activities were also used by at least two teachers (T2 and T3) to formally assess learners' oral skills. The practice of monitoring and correcting students' pronunciation was reported a total of nine times by four teachers.

When evaluating her teaching experience, Teacher 1 indicated that repetition exercises were effective at improving her students' pronunciation. She stated that "the great improvement students showed was in terms of pronunciation. Most of the group presented serious problems… I had to work arduously on repetition. However, this work proved to be effective, since there was clear improvement in pronunciation." Conversely, other teachers found that the same strategy did not work for all of the students. Teacher 3, for instance, mentioned that some pronunciation problems persisted regardless of the numerous repetition exercises she did: "Some students had difficulties pronouncing the *th* ending and I made them repeat it many times until they got it right, but two of them did not." Later she reflected: "It is interesting to notice that even with so many exercises of audio and repetition, besides the conversation exercises, these students have so many problems in their speech." Teacher 3 was aware that her teaching was not effective for all the students, but perhaps she did not know what else to do to help them. Similarly, Teacher 7 said that his group generally improved, but some learners could not keep up: "It is possible to see some progress in some students regarding pronunciation and intonation, but in general most of them still need more practice… Unfortunately, some students could not maintain the oral standard achieved by most of the students."

Expressing Beliefs

When looking into the excerpts in which the pre-service teachers expressed their thoughts and opinions, no general tendencies were identified. Still, some interesting topics emerged, including reflections about pronunciation models and teaching objectives. Teacher 1 was particularly concerned about her role as a model for learners:

> I can say that the work done with the students helped me to reflect on my own pronunciation. I became more aware of the mistakes I made and that I can never be too careful, as a large portion of the input students receive comes from the teacher.

She reported having difficulties with the pronunciation of *th* herself and that she had to practice at home before going to class in order to pronounce it "as correctly as possible". Teacher 1 also mentioned having spent an entire class mispronouncing the word *determiners*. When she found out her mistake, she realized that she needed to pay more attention to her own pronunciation.

Teacher 7 emphasized the importance of a native model. He said that all repetition activities were preceded by a recording so that "the students could have the exact perception of how a native speaker of the target language expresses himself, taking into account his pronunciation, accent, and intonation." He also justified his use of drilling activities by explaining that "it is through them that the students will have a model to improve their pronunciation." On the other hand, somewhat paradoxically, Teacher 7 reported telling his learners that English could have many accents and that making oneself understood was the main objective of oral communication. He told them that communication would be achieved as long as the message was conveyed "clearly and with good pronunciation." Teacher 6 expressed a similar idea about the objective of oral practice. She mentioned that the classroom activities aimed to "develop the intelligibility of the students when they communicate" and that "a perfect pronunciation should not be demanded" from the learners, since they have limited English exposure and language acquisition is a slow process. Nonetheless, similarly to Teacher 7, she seemed to hold the idea that pronunciation practice typically involved repetition and that it was disconnected from more communicative tasks: "Although we try to provide moments of authentic interaction, that is, when they can communicate based on their own context, this does not mean we cannot do repetition exercises, whose focus would be the practice of pronunciation".

Teacher 7 and Teacher 3 expressed some disbelief in the effectiveness of pronunciation teaching. Although Teacher 7 valued pronunciation, he did not seem to think that instruction in the classroom was enough for his learners. He claimed, on three occasions, that the learners had so many difficulties because they did not practice oral skills outside the classroom. Teacher 3 seemed somewhat pessimistic about the effects of pronunciation teaching to large groups of learners. She argued three times that pronunciation could not be taught adequately in these contexts, because it is impossible to "hear everyone and everything." She believed that significant improvement was only achieved when the teacher had "enough time to work on students' pronunciation errors one by one," despite the fact that her learners shared the same L1.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data revealed four main themes within the reports. Regarding the first, pre-service teachers often referred to "pronunciation problems" or cited vocabulary that their students had difficulties pronouncing, but did not explain what the exact problems were. This might indicate that sometimes the teachers were unable to articulate the problems they perceived in their students' pronunciation. Furthermore, the great majority did not mention prosodic features like stress, rhythm, and intonation as problematic, which differs from previous research findings obtained in ESL settings (e.g., Burgess & Spencer, 2000; Foote et al., 2011). In fact, certain segments and especially the pronunciation of individual words were the most frequently mentioned problems. It is unlikely that their learners did not struggle with pronunciation beyond the word level. It

might be that the student teachers were not sensitive to these problems because had not been trained to identify and work on them in the classroom.

As for the second theme, it was found that the teachers did not adequately account for the pronunciation problems reported. More often than not, they presented no explanations or generally attributed these problems to the influence of the L1 or to the differences between the sounds of the two languages. In the more detailed accounts, some misconceptions were identified, which suggests that the teachers had little knowledge of the phonologies of BP and English and of the reasons behind very common mistakes made by Brazilian EFL learners.

Unfortunately, some student teachers did not write much about their teaching practices. In several passages, they mentioned having worked on pronunciation without describing specific approaches or exercises. The activities that were described mainly involved listening to a model – either the teacher or a recording – and repeating a target word or structure many times. Asking learners to read aloud and correcting their pronunciation were also frequently reported practices. None of the teachers mentioned using more explicit techniques to raise students' awareness of pronunciation, such as articulatory descriptions, phonetic symbols, or visual aids, not even when repetition was ineffective. It appears that these instructors adopted an *intuitive-imitative approach* rather than an *analytic-linguistic approach*, which would have been more complete (for a description of these approaches, see Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010). Thus, their practices differ from those reported by ESL teachers in Burgess & Spencer (2000) and Foote et al. (2011), which included an array of techniques to teach pronunciation explicitly. In their pronunciation teaching, the Brazilian student teachers more closely resembled the Finnish EFL instructors in Tergujeff (2012b), who emphasized segments and made use of imitation, teacher correction and, to a lesser extent, reading aloud.

Two teachers were concerned about the need for providing students with accurate pronunciation models. At the same time, the rather contradictory notion that intelligibility is a more appropriate goal for learners also came up. This idea might be a reflection of the communicative framework in which the participants were trained. Previous studies involving non-native English instructors have also identified a conflict between their attachment to native models and their awareness of what is realistic or relevant for learners (Sifakis & Sougari, 2005; Timmis, 2002). Interestingly, the same teachers who mentioned the importance of intelligibility associated pronunciation instruction with repetition tasks, apparently seeing it as something separate from communicative practice.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the pre-service EFL teachers generally attended to pronunciation and possibly understood the importance and purpose of its teaching. Nonetheless, they did not appear to be fully prepared for this task for two main reasons. First, most of the time they could not appropriately diagnose and explain very common pronunciation errors made by Brazilian EFL learners. Second, their teaching seemed to be restricted to an intuitive-imitative approach, with no use of more explicit, awareness-raising activities. These results suggest a disparity between previous ESL teaching practices reported and the EFL context in this study. In addition, they may point to a need for more specific training in pronunciation instruction at the participants' university.

Such results should be interpreted within the limitations of the present study, which include the small sample size and the fact that internship reports are not necessarily thorough accounts. It is possible that the student teachers forgot to describe some their practices or omitted information

that could be relevant to this study. Another limitation is that their reported practices and cognition concerning other areas of language learning (e.g., English grammar) were not analyzed for comparison. It may be that the student teachers had difficulties in other areas as well, not only pronunciation. Still, it is believed that what they did and did not report provided some indications of their beliefs, knowledge, and practices related to pronunciation. Future research addressing the limitations of this study is called for. In particular, as Baker and Murphy (2011) observed, there is a need for studies on teacher cognition that include a classroom observation component. This would allow for the collection of more detailed and reliable data about teachers' classroom practices.

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