

Ready to teach English pronunciation? Student teachers' views and experiences.

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This study

- provides background information on the role of pronunciation in EFL teacher education;
- draws on data collected as part of a larger study on pronunciation learning and teaching in Austria;
- explores student teachers' perceptions of and experiences with pronunciation learning and teaching;
- highlights the need for a pronunciation didactics course in EFL teacher education programmes.

1. Rationale

Although the last decade has born witness to a renewed scholarly interest in second-language pronunciation learning, research into the role of pronunciation in English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education still seems to lag behind (Tsunemoto, Tofimovich & Kennedy, 2020; Uzun & Ay, 2018). Considering the crucial role pronunciation plays in communicative language teaching (Murphy, 2018), it is particularly striking that many EFL teacher training programmes fail to equip future teachers with highly valuable skills both in terms of language competence and pedagogical knowledge (Baker, 2011; Burri, Baker & Chen, 2017). In fact, a surprisingly low number of teacher education programmes include explicit courses focusing on developing future teachers' phonological skills as well as their ability to teach pronunciation (Gilbert, 2010; Henderson et al, 2012; Macdonald, 2002).

Against the backdrop of this conspicuous neglect on the part of many curriculum designers, a large number of practicing EFL teachers admit that they feel reluctant to teach pronunciation (Murphy, 2018). This general hesitance has far-reaching implications for today's EFL classroom. Indeed, even experienced EFL teachers have reported discomfort in correcting or assessing their learners' pronunciation, with some of them shying away from teaching pronunciation altogether (Baker & Burri, 2016; Nangimah, 2020). Especially novice teachers, who are faced with the harsh reality of consistently growing demands posed by highly diverse

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classrooms and changing curricula, often view pronunciation as the most negligible part of language teaching (Baker & Burri, 2016). This, however, is certainly problematic considering the important role it has in achieving successful communication (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

According to research conducted by Baker (2011), Burri (2015), or Yokomoto (2016), EFL teachers' own pronunciation learning experiences greatly impact their beliefs about phonological instruction in general as well as the degree of confidence in their own ability to teach pronunciation. In order to avoid English language classrooms where pronunciation learning is relegated to the sides or abandoned completely, it is therefore important to take the views of future EFL teachers into account in order to tailor teacher education programmes to the needs of 21st century language learners.

In their pronunciation teaching survey, Henderson et al. (2012) found that the vast majority of teacher education programmes in Europe do not include any courses focusing on pronunciation. In contrast to that, the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna offers an explicit pronunciation class in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme, which seeks to assist the students in developing their pronunciation skills. At present, no courses are offered specialising in pronunciation didactics. Hence, the question arises if this language competence class is sufficient to foster the students' confidence in teaching pronunciation and – at the same time – provides them with a repertoire of teaching tools and methods needed to successfully cope with heterogeneous learner groups.

2. Research questions

This paper reports on the findings of the second phase of a larger research project on pronunciation learning and teaching in Austria. While in the first phase, the question of how student teachers choose a model accent was of central concern (Richter & Weissenbäck, 2021), this part investigates student teachers' experience with pronunciation teaching and their views concerning their own proficiency in this respect. Thus, the following four research questions will be answered in this paper:

RQ1

What kind of experiences with pronunciation learning and teaching have EFL student teachers had so far?

RQ2

How do EFL student teachers feel about their own pronunciation skills?

RQ3

How confident do EFL student teachers feel about their own pronunciation teaching skills?

RQ4

Do the EFL student teachers believe that there is a need for a separate didactics class focusing on pronunciation teaching?

3. Empirical Study

3.1 Setting

Students enrolled in the teacher education programme at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna have to take two language competence courses focusing on developing their speaking skills. Firstly, Practical Phonetics and Oral Communication Skills (PPOCS 1) is a pronunciation class in the BEd programme, which specifically aims to provide students with a solid grounding in practical phonetics (Richter, 2021b). The second course, Advanced Speaking Skills for English Teachers (ASSET) (Richter, 2021a), is specifically tailored to the needs of future teachers and is commonly taken in the second semester of the MEd programme. In ASSET, pronunciation as such only plays a minor role in that feedback is provided on this particular aspect both by the teacher and the peers. However, pronunciation is not taught explicitly at this stage anymore.

3.2 Sampling and participants

63 students enrolled in the MEd programme at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna participated in this study. Data was collected in the winter semester 2021/22 and the summer semester 2022. All the participants were either enrolled in ASSET or had already taken it. At the time of data collection, 40% were already teaching English at school or another educational institution.

Three quarters (76%) of the respondents were female. This 3:1 ratio largely corresponds to the average gender distribution in the teacher education programme at the department. The average age of the participants was 24, and the level of English language competence the participants are expected to have reached is level C1 (Council of Europe, 2020).

3.3 Instruments

In order to gauge the students' experiences and views, a mixed-method approach was adopted to answer the research questions. A carefully constructed online survey with closed and open questions was designed using Google Forms. Participation was optional and anonymous.

The online questionnaire was structured into three main parts, namely questions regarding students' biographical data, their perception of their own pronunciation skills, and their views on and experiences with pronunciation teaching. The majority of the questions consisted of Likert-scale items. For most of these items, open questions asking the students to provide reasons for their choices were given. However, not all the respondents added verbal comments in the provided spaces.

3.4 Data analysis

The collected data was analysed using Excel. Participant responses were analysed descriptively using mean scores, standard deviations, percentages, and frequencies. For the qualitative part, responses to open-ended items were grouped thematically through content analysis.

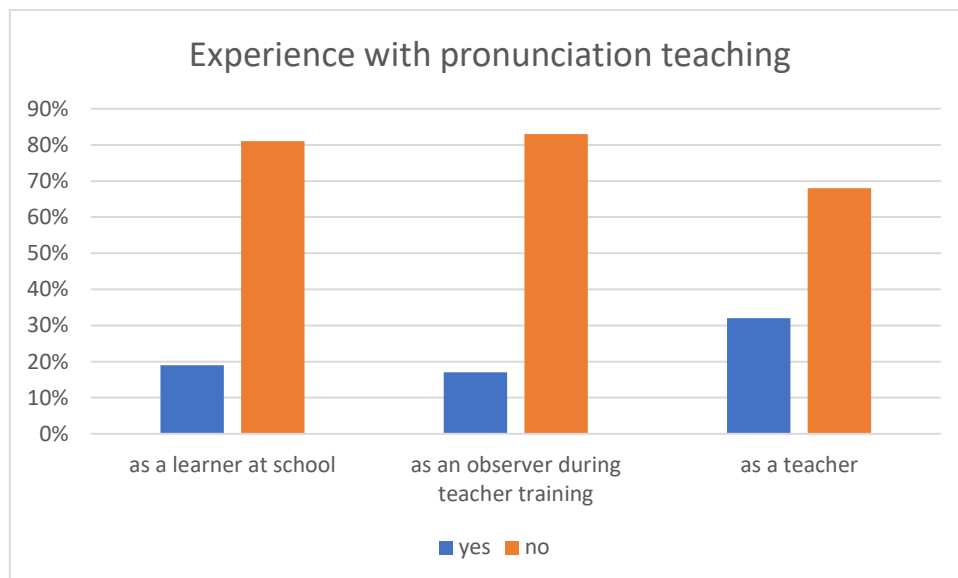
4. Findings

4.1 Experience with pronunciation teaching

In order to answer the first research question pertaining to the experiences that EFL student teachers have had with pronunciation teaching, responses to three different items, i.e. experience as learners at school, as observers during school practica, and as teachers, were analysed.

As illustrated in Figure 1, a staggering 81% of the participants report that they have not had any experience with pronunciation teaching as learners at school. Similarly, 83% of the respondents assert that in the course of their teacher education programme they have not observed any lessons in which the EFL teachers focused on pronunciation. Although about 32% of the student teachers claim that they themselves have already taught pronunciation in the classroom, the percentage of those who have not is still very high with 68%.

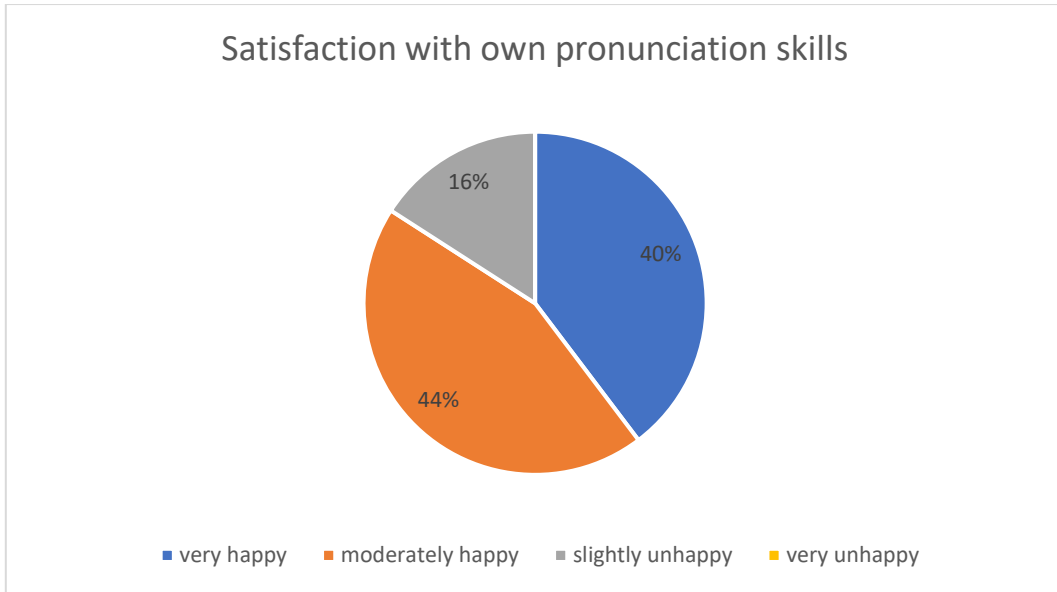
Figure 1: Experience with pronunciation teaching



4.2 Satisfaction with own pronunciation skills

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the participants' overall satisfaction with their own pronunciation skills is relatively straightforward. The majority of the participants indicate that they are very or moderately satisfied with their own pronunciation skills. More specifically, 40% feel 'very happy' and 44% feel 'moderately happy' with their pronunciation skills. Less than 16% claim that they are 'slightly unhappy' and no single respondent is 'very unhappy'.

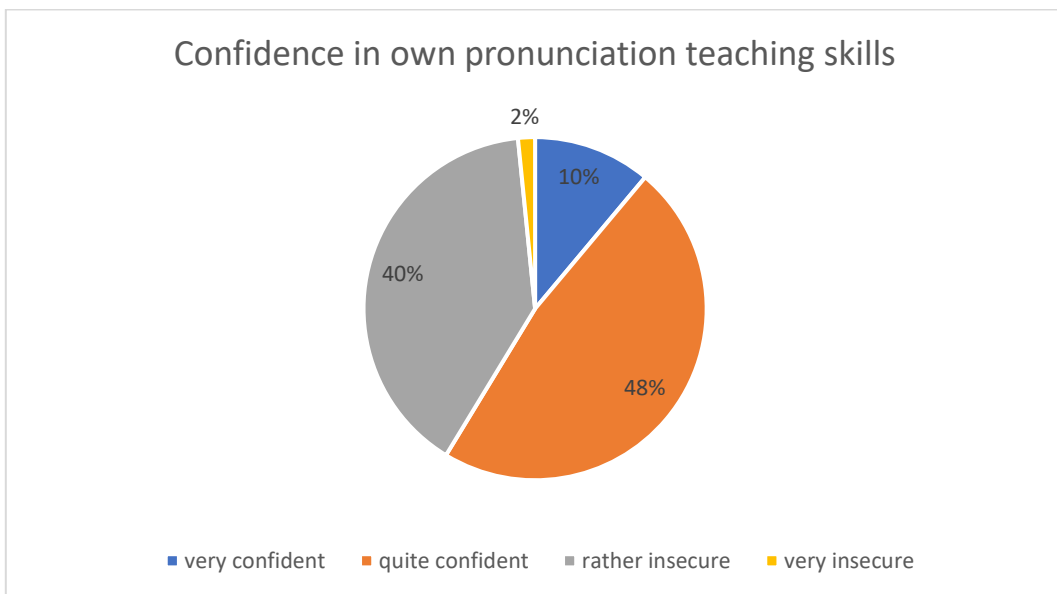
Figure 2: Satisfaction with own pronunciation skills



4.3 Confidence in own pronunciation teaching skills

In order to address the third research question, which intends to capture the participants' perceptions of their own pronunciation-teaching skills, the respondents were asked to rate their own confidence in teaching pronunciation. As Figure 3 clearly demonstrates, slightly more than half of the participants feel 'quite confident' or 'very confident', whereas 40% feel 'rather insecure' or even 'very insecure' (2%).

Figure 3: Confidence in own pronunciation teaching skills



In addition, the participants were also requested to provide reasons for their answers. The findings show that those respondents who consider themselves proficient in pronunciation teaching state that this confidence derives from their theoretical knowledge acquired in PPOCS 1 (R9, R24, R38, R45), their interest in the matter (R39), their access to reference books (R32), or their own language proficiency (R55). In contrast, those who feel insecure generally assert that they do not feel adequately prepared for pronunciation teaching. For

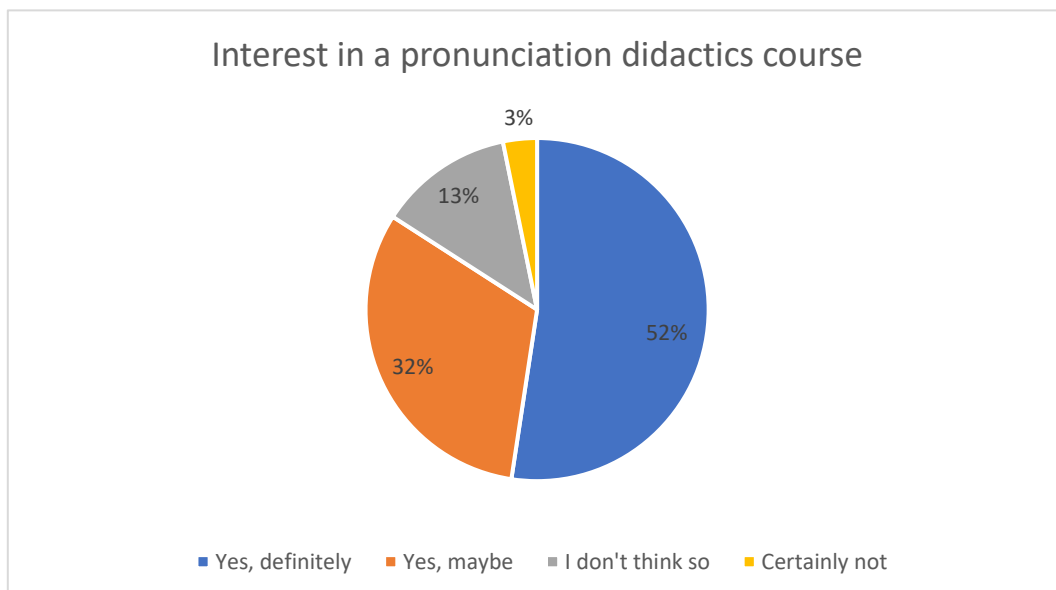
instance, respondents note that there is “not a lot of input” (R41, R61), that pronunciation “has never been the focus at university” (R43), or that “no class taught us how to do that” (R53). Others indicate that although they have sufficient phonological knowledge, they lack didactic knowledge (R38).

4.4 The need for a didactics course on pronunciation teaching

To capture the role of English pronunciation teaching in the various didactics classes in the course of their studies, the participants were asked to rate the importance of various aspects of EFL teaching (i.e. writing, reading, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) on a five-point Likert-scale from ‘highly important’ to ‘not important at all’. While approximately 50% of the respondents are under the impression that teaching writing, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary are ‘highly important’ or ‘important’, reading, listening, and pronunciation are not attributed as much attention. Indeed, almost 20% of the participants feel that teaching pronunciation is ‘of little importance’ in the didactics classes and 5% indicate that this aspect is ‘not important at all’, which makes pronunciation teaching the most underrepresented aspect of EFL teaching.

In order to answer the fourth research question, the participating student teachers were asked whether they would be interested in a course dedicated to teaching pronunciation. Figure 4 shows that approximately 84% of the participants state that they would be ‘definitely interested’ or ‘maybe interested’ in such a course at the Department of English and American Studies, claiming that it would be generally “beneficial” (R15), “helpful for teaching [and] interesting to [them] personally” (R40) as well as “useful for [their] teaching career” (R44). Others point out that pronunciation is crucial, for it helps to make speech intelligible (R55), and that the pronunciation course that is currently offered at the Department of English and American Studies did not provide them with enough didactic knowledge (R56).

Figure 4: Interest in a pronunciation didactics course



5. Implications

This study set out to explore EFL student teachers' perceptions of and experiences with pronunciation teaching. The most obvious finding emerging from the data is the distinct lack of experience on the part of the respondents. To be more precise, the majority of the students have very little to no experience with pronunciation teaching as learners, observers, or teachers. About one third of them, however, have some experience teaching pronunciation in an EFL classroom. Their confidence to conduct such lessons without any specific prior training could perhaps be related to the skills and the knowledge they acquired in a compulsory language competence course focusing on practical phonetics (i.e. PPOCS 1).

Another crucial finding concerns the observation that although more than 80% of the participants report to be content with their own pronunciation skills, almost half of them do not feel confident teaching pronunciation. Considering the fact that all the respondents are approaching the end of the Master's programme, this deficit is alarming but does not come entirely unexpected. In fact, similar results were reported in earlier studies conducted in the European context by Henderson et al. (2012), which unveiled fundamental shortcomings on the part of EFL teachers' pronunciation teaching skills. The teachers in their study also rated their own mastery as favourable but their pronunciation teaching skills as poor.

While the University of Vienna offers an explicit pronunciation class to enhance the future teachers' own phonological competence, this is clearly beneficial for their pronunciation skills but not sufficient preparation for pronunciation teaching. Our study has shown that the overwhelming majority of the respondents miss a separate course on how to teach pronunciation and they express their specific interest in it. This course could then help lay the groundwork for future generations of EFL teachers to develop the confidence needed to teach a skill as vital to communicative language competence as pronunciation.

Taken together, these results corroborate earlier findings demonstrating that pronunciation teaching still does not receive the attention it deserves in today's teacher education. While this small-scale study can only provide a small glimpse into student teachers' views, it has clearly revealed a need to be taught how to teach pronunciation. In the next phase of this project, pronunciation teaching and learning will be investigated through the lens of in-service teachers. It will be interesting to see if potential repercussions of this deficit in teacher education are also found in the views and experiences of professionals operating in Austrian EFL classrooms.

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