

Pronunciation teaching in a Finnish secondary school:

A case study

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Ääntäminen on kiinteä osa hyvää kielitaitoa, mutta sen opettaminen on jäänyt vähälle huomiolle. Koska koulujen tehtävä on kuitenkin antaa oppilaille mahdollisimman hyvä kielitaito, ääntämistä pitäisi opettaa enemmän. Opetuksen vähäisyys voi johtua sen arvostelun vaikeudesta ja siitä, ettei opettajankoulutuksessa kunnolla ohjata opiskelijoita sen opettamisessa. Lisäksi, vaikka kommunikatiivinen kielenopetus (CLT) sisältääkin paljon oppilaiden välisiä suullisia harjoituksia, se ei kuitenkaan keskity ääntämisen opettamiseen. Osittain ääntämisen opetuksen vähyys johtuu siitä, että sen tutkimus on jäänyt vähälle huomioille ja sen opettamisen on ajateltu olevan tarpeetonta ja tehotonta.</p> <p>Tässä tutkielmassa selvitan kuinka paljon ääntämistä opetetaan Jyväskylän Normaalikoulun luokilla 7-9. Tutkin myös kuinka suuri osa opetuksesta on eksplisiittistä opetusta vai luotetaanko pelkästään implisiittisiin opetustapoihin. Eksplisiittisiä opetustapoja ovat muun muassa sanojen toistaminen opettajan jälkeen ja hetket, jolloin opettaja korjaa oppilaan ääntämisvirheitä. Implisiittisiä tapoja ovat sellaiset, joissa oppilas joutuu itse tunnistamaan oikean ääntämisen ilman että sitä hänelle sanotaan, tällaisia ovat esimerkiksi videon katsominen ja kuullunymmärtämisharjoitukset. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että ääntämistä opetetaan erittäin vähän eksplisiittisesti, mutta oppilailla on kohtuulliset mahdollisuudet oppia ääntämistä implisiittisesti. Ääntämistä pitäisi kuitenkin opettaa lisää eksplisiittisesti, jotta voitaisiin varmistua siitä, että oppilailla olisi mahdollisimman kattava kielellinen osaaminen.</p>	
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1 Introduction

Pronunciation is an easily overlooked aspect of language when teaching a given language. Firstly, it is assumed that students pick it up independently when they use and hear the language (Derwing and Munro, 2014). Therefore it has not been thought necessary to allocate time to teach it explicitly. Secondly, there is no established way to evaluate pronunciation objectively, because what someone sees as incorrect pronunciation, another may see as a different accent or dialect. Finally, teacher training program does not cover pronunciation at all (Tergujeff, 2013; Derwing and Munro, 2014), so new teachers do not necessarily know how they could approach the subject and present it to their students.

However, the aim of the school is to give a comprehensive understanding of language to the students, and they cannot do it without teaching pronunciation. Nowadays teaching is focused on grammar and reading comprehension, which is understandable considering the prominence of these aspects in the matriculation examination. Additionally, schools are supposed to provide good enough language skills for the students to be able to have a discussion using the language, which requires at least decent pronunciation skills. Many students have the required skill level at the end of senior secondary school, but approximately 50% of the students do not go there National Board of Education (2014a). It is possible that some of these students reach this level, but most fall short of it. These students could be helped by giving more advice concerning their pronunciation. Naturally students gain pronunciation skills by learning the language in general, but it would be more beneficial if they were taught pronunciation explicitly. It would be even more beneficial if learning pronunciation was tied to things learners do outside school. Learners' pronunciation skills could be improved even more during their free time if they were already attuned to the ways of gaining those skills.

In this thesis I aim to find out how much pronunciation is taught in Jyväskylän Normaalikoulu classes 7-9 and whether the teachers teach pronunciation explicitly or is the teaching limited to implicit methods. Explicit methods include for example error correction and repeating after the teacher, whereas implicit methods rely on students identifying the correct pronunciation from a provided output, such as listening comprehension exercise. This thesis provides also suggestions on how pronunciation teaching could be implemented in the lessons and why it would be beneficial to do so.

2 Literature Review

Although pronunciation is an important aspect of overall language skills, its research has been quite limited in recent years, because its teaching was thought to be unnecessary and ineffective (Derwing and Munro, 2014, p. 38). Ever since the popularity of audio-lingual method began to decline, the research of pronunciation teaching has also declined, and it has only recently begun to rise again. This has led to not only a gap in students' language knowledge, but also to a gap in teachers' ability to teach pronunciation, as teacher training program does not cover it extensively (Derwing and Munro, 2014).

2.1 Existing pronunciation teaching

A major study on pronunciation teaching in Finland (Tergujeff, 2013) studied different types of pronunciation teaching methods in classes ranging from primary to senior secondary school. Tergujeff found that pronunciation is taught only rarely in Finnish schools. Additionally, teaching concentrates often on the individual sounds instead of on sentence level aspects of pronunciation, such as rhythm and intonation. Rhythm and intonation were deemed very important in order to acquire a good oral skills in English (Tergujeff, 2013, p. 24). This is supported by the current recommendations, as proposed by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) as cited by Tergujeff 2013, which suggest using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to teach pronunciation. CLT concentrates on sentence level pronunciation, while having a lessened focus on individual sounds. Although this would be beneficial for advanced students who already have a good grip on individual sounds, those who are not as proficient could encounter problems if those individual sounds were not covered extensively. In addition, one problem with CLT is that does not explicitly teach pronunciation, instead relying on students speaking English and learning pronunciation from that. This can be very hard for some students, as they may not have proper examples where they can first hear the sounds before attempting to produce them.

Although CLT is the recommended pronunciation teaching methods and is supposed to be used in Finnish schools, Tergujeff (2013, p. 43) noticed that it is not used according to recommendations. She observed that most of the teaching that took place was the listen-and-repeat method, in

which students hear a word or a sentence and then repeat it. This kind of repeating after a model set by authority is a good way for the students to observe how a word is pronounced, but it is also easy for them to just automatically repeat the words without concentrating on pronunciation. Therefore it is more effective as ear-training, where students become accustomed to the sound of the word and learn pronunciation that way (Field, 2014, pp. 82-83). Although this kind of learning has merits, it still relies on students themselves practicing and producing the sound on their own. The second and third most popular methods were error correction and the teacher pointing out the properties of pronunciation, such as common mistakes and the differences between British and American pronunciation. Error corrections was mostly used in situations, where mispronunciation could have caused breakdowns in communication. As these methods focus on individual sounds instead of sentence level pronunciation, they actually do not follow the principles established by CLT (Tergujeff, 2013, p. 43). Because of this, students may have a grasp on how different words are pronounced, but when they talk with other people they need to use longer pieces of text and they struggle with sentence stress and intonation.

Tergujeff (2013, p. 45) also interviewed learners on currently used pronunciation teaching. Whereas primary school learners were satisfied with the teaching, secondary school learners thought that there was not enough of it. Although they did not want to achieve native-like pronunciation skills, instead aiming for intelligibility and fluency, they felt that they were not instructed enough to achieve that. The fact that learners are aiming for intelligibility over native-like pronunciation is supported by numerous studies, such as the one by Derwing and Munro (2014); Tergujeff (2013). Tergujeff (2013, p. 45) also observed that although the learners were of the opinion that they had learned pronunciation in school, they also mentioned sources outside of it, such as media and social situations. They had also noticed that most of teaching was done by using the aforementioned listen-and-repeat method, supplemented by read aloud exercises and listening to different aspects of pronunciation, such as word stress. Students' comments imply that currently a mix of both recommended methods and those that could be given less emphasis is used. It is possible, that when all of them are mixed together, students get confused and their learning is held back (Derwing and Munro, 2014, pp. 48).

Several studies (Derwing and Munro, 2005, 2014; Tergujeff, 2013) suggest that the reason why

pronunciation is not taught in schools is the lack of training teachers receive. If teachers are not instructed how to teach something, they would have to rely on their own skills and ingenuity, which everybody might not have. This could lead to the results being not as good as they could be. Derwing and Munro (2014) noticed that future EFL teachers receive no training on how to teach pronunciation during the years they studied in the university. This is quite baffling, as pronunciation is a core skill in language learning, and if the teachers could properly teach it, the students would considerably more skillful at the end of their schooling. Tergujeff (2013) also mentions lack of teaching strategies in CLT as a reason for the absence of pronunciation teaching in schools. This is disappointing, because as was shown by Couper (2003, 2006), the effects of pronunciation teaching are very noticeable.

2.2 Effects of pronunciation teaching

The research on effects of pronunciation teaching on students' pronunciation skills has increased in the last decade after a rather slow period, because the effect of pronunciation in communication has been observed to be greater than previously thought. For example, Couper studied the effects of explicit pronunciation syllabus in ESOL teaching (Couper, 2003) and the effects of pronunciation teaching (Couper, 2006) on students' short- and long-term pronunciation skills. In addition, Derwing and Munro (2014), Yates and Zielinski (2014) and Field (2014) have studied the improvements that can be achieved through pronunciation is teaching.

In his study Couper (2003) discovered that an explicit pronunciation syllabus had a notable positive impact on the pronunciation skills of learners. The syllabus developed for the study aimed to increase the learners' awareness to pronunciation and help them to focus their attention to areas that required the greatest amount of improvement (Couper, 2003, p. 56). The learners were tested before and after the syllabus was implemented on a course that lasted for 16 weeks. On average the number of errors made by the learners decreased by a third and overall the benefits of a pronunciation syllabus were significant. It is also important to notice that the learners were enthusiastic about pronunciation teaching, and would have hoped that they had been taught in a similar manner during their earlier studies (Couper, 2003, p. 66). Although the same kind of enthusiasm would be preferable also in secondary school, only some students have that kind of

enthusiasm. The learners in Couper's study were post-intermediate level, as opposed to the at best intermediate level learners in the study conducted here, the results are applicable to that skill level. This is because both have not been taught pronunciation in schools before, and through same kind of syllabus both can gain similar improvements on their pronunciation skills.

In a subsequent study Couper (2006) observed how the learners retained the skills they had gained during short teaching sessions over the course of two weeks. The test given to the learners immediately after the sessions had ended, showed that the number of errors made by the learners had decreased to a fourth from the pre-course test. Learners were given the test again 12 weeks after the course had ended, and the amount of errors made by the students in the test 12 weeks after the course rose only by two percentage points from the previous test. This clearly shows how much pronunciation can be improved in only a short amount of time. It can be deduced that should pronunciation be taught in school, the improvements in students' pronunciation skills would last long. If pronunciation was taught continuously during the students' school years, benefits would be even more pronounced.

Whereas Couper (2003) studied the effect a single course syllabus has on students' pronunciation skills, Yates and Zielinski (2014) studied pronunciation embedded into the curriculum. They suggested that pronunciation should be taught from the beginning of the students' schooling and should be tied into the curriculum, instead of being treated as a separate sub-subject of English. This is in contrast to what Tergujeff (2013, p. 25) observed in her study, where pronunciation was implement in the subjects themselves but was not focused on. A study by Yates and Zielinski (2014) suggests that students should be taught pronunciation explicitly in order to improve their language skills. Findings by Tergujeff (2013) indicate that this is at least somewhat used in Finnish schools, as majority of teaching methods she observed included explicitly telling students how some words were pronounced or telling them what kind of mistakes they made in pronunciation. Derwing and Munro (2014) are also of the opinion that explicit attention should be paid on the students' pronunciation, for example correcting their pronunciation if they make mistakes.

2.3 Research questions

As Tergujeff (2013) noted, pronunciation is not taught as extensively as it should be. Instead, national curriculum chooses to emphasize the teaching of grammar and the understanding of texts, with oral communication and especially pronunciation being in more of a supporting role (National Board of Education, 2014b). This can also be observed in the national curriculum for secondary schools, where there is only one broad aim for students' pronunciation skills, namely they should be able to communicate with relative ease in everyday situations. Although it is written in a very broad form it is not as extensive when compared with aims for some of the other topics, such as grammar. This case study will observe how teachers apply the curriculum to their teaching. The research questions are:

1. To what extent, if any, is pronunciation taught in a Finnish secondary school?
2. How is pronunciation taught in a Finnish secondary school?

This case study will concern only Jyväskylän Normaalikoulu, a secondary school in a medium sized city in Central Finland. Normaalikoulu is a slight exception to the other secondary schools in Finland, as it is run by the university instead of the municipality and it is used in research as well as in teacher training program for future teachers.

The first research question covers any explicit pronunciation teaching that happened during the observations. Explicit teaching includes specific pronunciation focused sessions, error correction and learning of phonetic alphabet, among others. Attention was not only paid on the number of instances where pronunciation was taught, but also on the length of these instances. Also, some observation was made on possible times when pronunciation could have been taught. For the second research question, I observed if pronunciation is taught explicitly in Normaalikoulu. To complement explicit pronunciation teaching, I studied what kind of implicit ways of learning pronunciation there is to support, or replace, the explicit methods. Implicit methods include situations in which English is used to convey messages but the focus is not on pronunciation. These are, for example, teaching in English, watching videos, listening to recordings and doing communication exercises.

3 Methods and results

The study was done by observing secondary school classes 7-9 in Jyväskylän Normaalikoulu. In order to gain good overall comprehension of the pronunciation teaching in the secondary, near equal number of classes from all three class levels was observed. In total I observed 18 classes of teaching in Normaalikoulu. Of the 18 classes, five were seventh year, seven were eighth year and six were ninth year classes. This provides a good basis for comparing the differences between class levels with good accuracy, as every class level has enough observed classes for a fair comparison. In addition, I wanted to find out if different teachers taught more pronunciation than others, so I tried to observe classes held by various teachers. As the scale of this study is quite small, it was deemed not necessary to record these classes. Instead, analysis is based on notes taken during the observations.

Of the 18 classes observed, five had explicit pronunciation teaching, as is shown in figure 1. The total amount of different instances where pronunciation was taught explicitly was seven. In addition to explicit pronunciation teaching, these classes also had instances where pronunciation could be learned implicitly. Although the number seems to be adequate, it is slightly misleading:

Explicit pronunciation teaching in classes

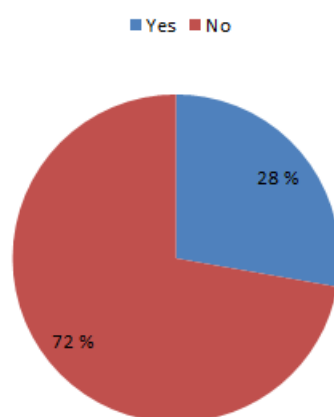


Figure 1: Percentage of classes in which pronunciation was taught explicitly.

of these five instances, three lasted for more than a minute. During these instances the students repeated words that were either said by the teacher or came from the tape. The effectiveness of these instances are debatable, as the students may have just mechanically repeated the words without

paying attention to the way they are pronounced. In two classes the teacher instructed students on how some words were pronounced. However, these instructions were not given to the whole class, instead only face-to-face to those students who asked how the words were pronounced. Finally, in two instances the teacher corrected pronunciation errors made by some students. The amount of different explicit teaching methods can be seen in figure 2.

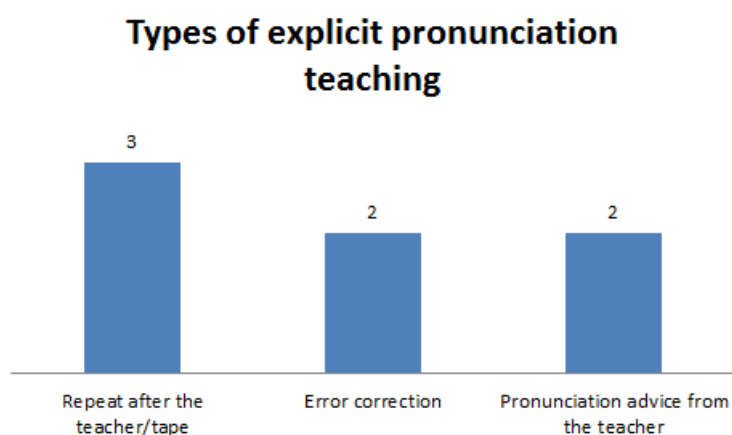


Figure 2: Different types of explicit pronunciation teaching methods

The majority of the classes did not have any kind of explicit pronunciation teaching, the amount being 13 classes out of 18. Instead, these classes relied solely on different kinds of implicit teaching methods.

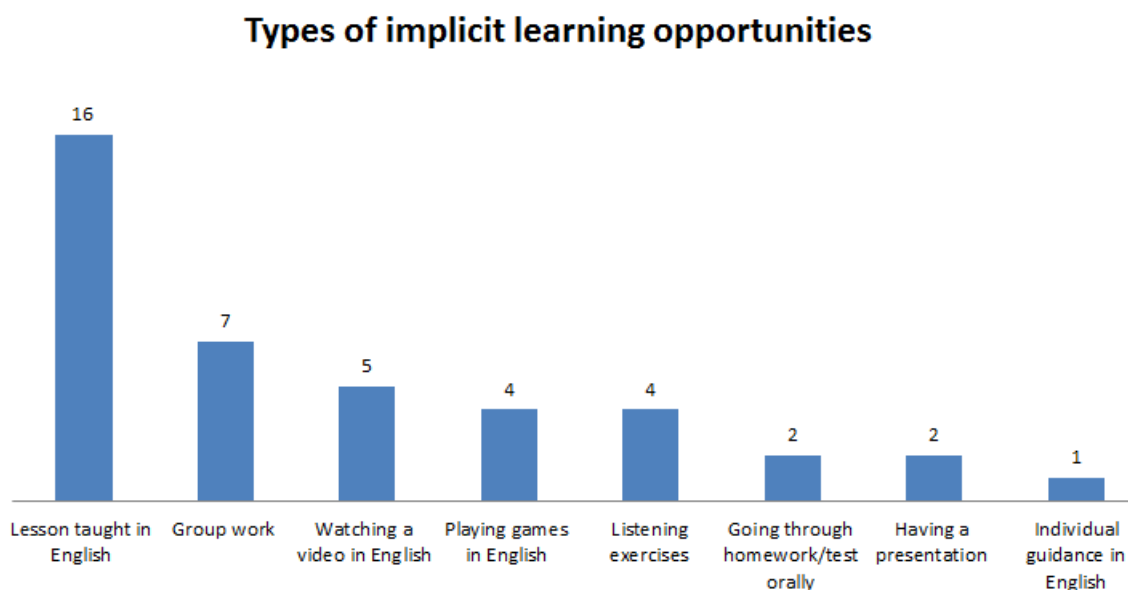


Figure 3: Amount of observed implicit pronunciation teaching methods

As figure 3 shows, the most frequently used implicit pronunciation teaching method is for the teacher to teach the class in English, which occurred in all but two lessons. This allows the students to hear English in context and hopefully pick up the correct way to pronounce the words. Of course this leaves a possibility for some pronunciation errors, as the teacher does not speak English as a native or even as a secondary language. Students also learned pronunciation by watching videos in English. Although this method was used only in five lessons, there is much potential in the use of media, especially if the videos are authentic. This also allows students to hear English from people who speak it as a second language, thus allowing to hear different dialects and therefore diversifying their language skills. Students can also learn various other things by watching authentic videos, for example what kind of words are typical for different situations and how stress and tone of the words affect how they are understood. In addition, videos introduce students to different cultural aspects of English-speaking countries. It was surprising to see that going through a test or homework orally was used so rarely. In these instances teacher said the correct answer out loud, but the students did not have to repeat it. Should the students have to do that, they could develop at least some kind of “feeling” to how letter combination are pronounced in different situations.

There existed possibilities for greater pronunciation teaching than found in this study. Teachers could have corrected different pronunciation errors more frequently than they actually did. Some of the classes were held by teacher trainees, who may not be comfortable correcting the students’ pronunciation. In addition, teachers could have told the students to repeat words and sentences according to their model. This could have worked very well when going through homework, as the students could have repeated the correct sentence after the teacher. Also, some of the group exercises could have focused more on pronunciation instead of general communication. In some classes students had the phonetic form of the words in a glossary beside the written form. Their attention could have been focused on these and the meaning of the symbols explained. Thus students would have the knowledge to learn pronunciation on their own.

4 Discussion

This section is divided in two parts. The first part is dedicated to the discussion of the results from this study and their comparison to some previous studies. In addition, some solutions to the observed problems are considered. In the latter part the validity of the results is discussed and justified.

4.1 Implication of the results

The results of this study are quite similar to what Tergujeff (2013) found in her more extensive study. Similar to her findings, the results of this study show that pronunciation teaching is not at the level it should be. It is not taught as much as it should be and when it is taught, the instances are very small and their effectiveness is questionable. It seems that the teaching relies almost completely on implicit learning methods, where the students themselves realize how the words are pronounced. There is no instruction provided to them, apart from possible error correction, which is not necessarily used. Although this is enough for the more motivated students whose language skills are above average, the students with lower skill level can struggle with their pronunciation.

The majority of explicit pronunciation teaching in this study was done through listen-and-repeat method. The result is similar to what Tergujeff found in her study Tergujeff (2013). There is some merit to it, as students have to repeat the words immediately after hearing them, so the correct pronunciation form is already in their minds. However it is clearly the most used method and it is easy for the students to just automatically repeat the words after the teacher and not pay attention to how the words are actually pronounced. One solution to this could be to use a language laboratory, where the students could record their speech on tape, then hear the mistakes and correct them. The teacher can usually listen to the students' tapes from his or her computer, so he or she could give advice to the student individually during the class. As the individual comments cannot be heard by other students, there would be more possibilities for the corrections by the teacher, as many students prefer private comments. This would also allow the teacher to concentrate more on the struggling students, as he or she could give just small encouragement to those students with only occasional mistakes. Naturally every students requires feedback, but this way

the teacher could prioritize his or her time more efficiently. Also, with this method weaker students would be forced to practice oral skills. They might be reluctant to speak up in front of other students, but be more comfortable with the knowledge only the teacher would hear them talking. Thus they would receive the practice they needed without the fear of being made feel inferior.

The majority of the implicit learning opportunities were based on students hearing the words, instead of producing them. This is the kind of ear-training that Field (2014, pp. 82-83) found to be helpful for the students, but it might not be enough. If the ear-training comes from a source with good pronunciation, such as the teacher or a tape/video with a native speaker, students' pronunciation skill potential can improve without knowingly teaching it. Students would still have to produce the sounds in order to fully improve their skills, and opportunities for producing the sounds would have to be offered during classes. Students can hear English also at other points during the classes, such as during group work. Although students can learn correct pronunciation from each other during different kinds of group work, they may also learn incorrect pronunciation, as only few students have good pronunciation skills in secondary school. Also, the group dynamics may affect the learning. Other students may emulate pronunciation of a popular student to improve their standing in his or her eyes, but if this student has below average pronunciation skills, other students may learn incorrect pronunciation. Therefore the teacher would have to be very observant during classes in order to eliminate as many of these mistakes as possible. Mistakes can be corrected later but it would be easier if the student had not had the time to use it and had not formed a pattern from it. But should the group work be tied in with ear-training, for example having the students watch a video and then discuss it, the number of errors made by the students could be decreased even further, as the students have the correct pronunciation already on their mind.

The most common way for the students to learn pronunciation implicitly was that the class was taught in English. This allows the students to hear the words continuously and it also builds their vocabulary, as the themes vary during the classes. But the English they hear is not spoken by a native speaker, leaving room for at least some pronunciation errors when compared with native English (Statista, 2016). This may should not be considered a hindrance, as there are considerably fewer native English speakers than there are those who speak English as a second language. Nev-

ertheless, due to these possible errors, teachers should be encouraged to use authentic videos or tapes to supplement students' learning. Authentic videos can also introduce the students to different kinds of accents and dialects of English, as opposed to the tapes accompanying the books the teachers use, which usually include only British or American English. Fortunately, internet sites such as YouTube have billions of videos, and a majority of them is in authentic English covering nearly all the topics possible. Therefore students could be given assignments to find a video on a topic that interests them and which has to have a native English speaker in it. The students could then describe the video to each in class and comment on other students' videos. If this kind of assignment was then repeated on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, students' pronunciation skills could begin to improve. The topics as well as different dialects in the assignments should vary, in order to prevent the students from getting bored with it and subsequently decreasing the usefulness of the assignment.

One of the significant factors in improving the students' pronunciation skills would be increasing the pronunciation training teachers receive in the teacher training program. Specifically, future teachers would have to be taught different pronunciation teaching methods. Currently future teachers are taught pronunciation only in a general course, which aims to make their pronunciation clearer and more native-like. While this kind of course is helpful, courses specifically on pronunciation teaching should be offered. These courses should advise future teachers on what kind of pronunciation teaching would be most effective on different class levels and which topics would be the most important ones. Currently teachers are left almost completely on their own in this aspect, as most of the training concerns either teaching written skills or grammar specifically. While these are probably the aspects that require the most attention for teacher trainees, some attention should also be given to oral skills and pronunciation, as these are aspects of language that cause major problems for students. Should the course be offered, it should be made an obligatory part of teacher training program, as the information from the course would be very important for future teachers.

Tergujeff (2013) points out that students were very interested in learning pronunciation. This was revealed by her interviews, where students expressed willingness to learn pronunciation but they were not taught it. In addition, they did not have any kind of preferences concerning British or

American accent, instead their only wish was that they could gain a clear and understandable pronunciation. They were also willing to forgo native-like pronunciation as long as their speech could be understood easily. This indicates that students are willing to be taught pronunciation. Based on what some of teachers said to me during and before the classes, they simply do not have enough time to teach pronunciation although they would like to do it. As there is willingness from both the students and the teachers, it would be recommendable to include explicit pronunciation teaching to the curriculum.

4.2 Validity of the results

As this study is a case study, the validity of the results has to be discussed. Normaalikoulu is a teacher training school and lot of the classes are held by teacher trainees. As almost half of the classes observed for this study were held by trainees, it might slightly affect the results, as their teaching style can vary to some extent from that of the regular teacher's, who knows the students better. For example, a regular teacher might correct students' pronunciation during the classes, whereas a teacher trainee may not have the confidence to do it. In addition, Normaalikoulu is a school where research is done and new teaching methods are tested on the students and teachers, so methods there might differ from other schools. This did not adversely affect the results of this study, as there is no on-going research concerning pronunciation teaching. There was one on-going research that might have slightly affected the results of this study. In it the learning of English and geography was linked closer together, and students had to make more presentations than normal, therefore increasing the number of implicit learning opportunities. The effect was assessed as slight, as the research was more concerned on the theme of the presentations, not the number of them. As this is a case study, this study observes only a small number of teachers. However, because the study was done in a teacher training school, the teachers there have and have had influence on the teaching style of many teachers, and therefore the results can be seen as representative. It was decided to let this study focus on only one school, with leaving the possibility of multiple schools open for future research. The results of this study can nevertheless be compared with existing studies, such as the one by Tergujeff (2013).

5 Conclusion

Although it has been observed that teaching pronunciation would have a great impact on students' overall language skills, it is still not taught in secondary schools. The effect of pronunciation teaching is long-lasting, greatly helping students for many years after they have left school. Based on the observations, most of the pronunciation students learn is through implicit means, not through explicit teaching of the subject. Although implicit means are not to be looked down on, they are not enough to provide comprehensive pronunciation skills. More explicit pronunciation teaching could, and should, be implemented, for example through authentic videos and focusing students' attention on the pronunciation in them. In addition, teacher training program should include courses in which different pronunciation teaching methods were introduced.

Future research on the subject should be conducted on comparing pronunciation teaching in different schools and on the effects different pronunciation teaching methods have on students' pronunciation skills. In addition, other secondary languages, such as Swedish, should be included in the research. The results of these studies should indicate the best way of teaching pronunciation and how it could be incorporated in current secondary school curriculum.

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