

Learners' opinion on their English pronunciation formation

Bachelor's Thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä - Abstract</p> <p>Globalisoituvassa maailmassamme on entistä tavallisempaa kohdata ihmisiä vieraista maista ja kommunikoida heidän kanssaan vieraalla kielellä. Koska englanti on tällä hetkellä läntisen maailman <i>lingua franca</i>, on se usein tällaisissa kohtaamisissa käytetty kieli. Ääntämisen oppimisella on suuri rooli näissä vieraskielisissä kohtaamisissa, koska ensivaikutelmaan vaikuttaa ulkoisten tekijöiden lisäksi myös ihmisen tapa ja taito puhua.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa lukion toisen vuoden opiskelijat kertovat itse, mitkä asiat luokkahuoneissa tai niiden ulkopuolella ovat auttaneet heitä englannin kielen ääntämisen oppimisessa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on saada selville, mitkä asiat ovat tärkeimpiä ääntämisen oppimisen välineitä oppilaille sekä määrittää, miten tärkeä rooli opettajalla on ääntämisen oppimisprosessissa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, ettei oppilaiden raportoimissa heille tärkeissä ääntämisen oppimisen malleissa ja harjoitteissa ole valtavia eroja. Kielitaidoltaan hieman heikkommat oppilaat luottavat opettajan malliin vahvemmin, mutta yleisesti opettajan rooli luokkahuoneessa on muuttunut kirjaimellisesta ääntämismallista, jonka puhetyyliä ja ääntämistä oppilaat jäljittelevät, muiden mallien tarjoajaksi. Tutkimuksen perusteella voidaan suositella, että opettajien olisi käytettävä ääntämisen opetuksessa useita erilaisia materiaaleja sekä mediamuotoja, jotta opetuksesta hyötyisivät kaikki oppilaat mahdollisimman paljon.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

When meeting new people, first impressions are based not only on appearance but also the way one speaks. So when meeting someone from a different country, speaking a foreign language, pronunciation plays an important role in that someone making the first impression about you.

In our globalizing world these multilingual, or foreign language, encounters are increasingly more and more common. Since English is at the moment clearly the *lingua franca* of the Western world, it often is the language used in these kinds of interactions. Therefore, English teachers and classes have an effect on the first impressions formed in those encounters.

In Education First's *English Proficiency Index* (2017), which annually researches the English skills of citizens from 80 countries, Finland landed at sixth. Finland has been close to the top of this research for several years. Therefore, it is very easy to say that most of Finns are able to read, write and maintain a conversation in English quite fluently. This tells us that in general we can be very proud of our education system and how it prepares us for these multilingual encounters mentioned before. However, having a wide vocabulary or knowing all of the grammar rules cannot salvage that first impression if you struggle with pronunciation.

To Finnish speakers, mastering English pronunciation can be a struggle. Tergujeff (2013:22) notes that Finnish speakers face difficulties in pronouncing certain English sounds, such as sibilants and dental fricatives. In addition, she mentions that the word stress and rhythm of English can be a struggle to L1 Finnish-speakers. Still, despite all these possible struggles, we are able to speak and use English without any issues and many of us do so every day in our normal lives.

For most of us this ability to communicate in English fluently comes from school. English teachers have made sure that their students are able to conquer the struggles

of correct word stress and dental fricatives. However, I was interested in knowing which specific factors help students learn English pronunciation. As a future English teacher, I wanted to learn whether my own example in the classroom is more important for pronunciation acquisition than informal learning outside the classroom. Therefore I decided to conduct this present study.

For this research, I had Finnish Upper Secondary School (=lukio) students explain the situations in which they, in their own opinion, have learned to pronounce English. As I was not able to find a research that clearly focuses the students, not teaching methods, I decided to ask the students themselves what they see as the most important situation or factor that has helped them to learn to pronounce English. In addition to finding out the specific situations that the students feel most useful to them, I also wanted to determine what my, and teachers' in general, role in the process of learning pronunciation is and how we can further develop our teaching to help our students even more than it does now.

2. BACKGROUND

Learning and knowing English is a big part of not only globalization but also our own society here in Finland. Not only is it present in entertainment, in the form of for example music and movies, it is also necessary for one's future as almost every job in the market requires their applicants to know English. Therefore, it is not a surprise that almost everyone in Finland learns English at school. For example, 98% of Upper Secondary graduates of 2017 studied English (Statistics Finland 2017). Pronunciation is an important part of learning any language and communication. Therefore, it has been a subject of various researches.

2.1 Previous studies

As Hummel (2013:146) points out, there is not one specific pattern or a way all language learners use to learn a new sound or a word. Language learning in all of its

fields is influenced by many language-external factors. Levis and Moyer (2014:74) list for example gender and L2 use to be commonly looked at language-external factors used when researching L2 but at the same time point out that their affect on phonological acquisition is rarely looked at. Derwing and Munro (2015:30) point out this same issue and mention that teachers could develop their teaching strategies by being aware of phonetic learning processes.

In addition to language-external factors, a big part of L2 pronunciation acquisition is the classroom in which it is taught. Derwing and Munro (2015:78-81) list factors, such as curriculum and textbooks, as factors that can have a impact on how the learners learn pronunciation but do not have control over. They emphasize the curricula being at times problematic and mention that some teachers feel they do not receive enough instruction on teaching pronunciation.

Where the curriculum or insufficient materials could be held accountable if learners struggle with their L2 pronunciation, it could be suggested that in the end teachers are mainly responsible for teaching their students pronunciation. Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015:43) points out that when teaching pronunciation, teachers are responsible for their own preparation, which goes all the way back to their training, knowledge of both L1 and L2 sound systems and their relation as well as possibly emerging difficulties. In addition to these, the teachers are supposed to be aware of the quality of their own pronunciation and remember to be involved in the instruction as well as know the individual problems and skill levels of the group they are teaching at the moment.

While the teacher's responsibilities cover a lot, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015:41) reminds that in order to get the most out of pronunciation teaching, the students themselves have responsibilities that they might not even realize at times. The learners are responsible for keeping up their motivation, setting goals and being active in practicing pronunciation both in and out of the classroom. Szpyra-Kozłowska also

emphasises that there are factors, such as sociocultural factors and personality, which affect learning pronunciation but are beyond the learners' control.

2.2 English pronunciation teaching in Finland

Taavitsainen and Pahta (2008:37) state that English has become a part of Finnish people's language resources. They point out that English is not only used as the *lingua franca* in international communication in our globalized world but it is more and more an everyday part of life of the Finns. Therefore, it is understandable that English is by far the most popular foreign language in Finnish schools and, since the revision of the national curriculum in 2014 (in action since 1.8.2016), teaching English begins in some schools in second grade when the learners are usually 8 years old (Finnish National Board of Education, 1:2014).

The National Curriculum for Basic Education in Finland (2014) mentions English pronunciation only for the grades 3 to 6. For the second grade, pronunciation is not mentioned as the curriculum there focuses only on introducing foreign languages and cultures to pupils. For grades 3 to 6 the curriculum emphasises that pronunciation, in addition to speech rhythm and intonation, should be practiced abundantly. More often the curriculum only mentions "learning speaking English" in various contexts. The National Curriculums for Basic Education also notes that several students use English in their free time and informal learning should be taken into account when planning teaching and its contents.

Tergujeff (2013:46) found that in Finland pronunciation teaching focuses on traditional ways of teaching, such as imitation and reading out loud. She also criticizes the sparseness of actual pronunciation teaching but simultaneously points out, that schools tend to use more general communicative exercises to work on their learners' pronunciation skills. Tergujeff (2013:48) also noticed an issue that rhythm, intonation and stress, which are difficult areas for Finnish speaking learners, are less emphasised

in teaching due to teachers not receiving instruction or ready-made materials in this area.

Tergujeff (2012:602) found by observing classrooms, that where the activities used in Finland are very traditional, the variation between these activities relies on the teacher. Some teachers in her research used various different methods whereas some used only one. Since the National Curriculum in Finland does not provide teachers with any instruction on how to teach pronunciation in classroom, it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure it helps as many of their students as possible.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research aims and questions

The aim of this study is to reveal how 17-year-old Finnish-speaking EFL-learners in their second year of Upper Secondary School, in their own opinion, feel they learn English pronunciation. The analysis will answer the following questions:

1. Which factors do the learners feel to be the most important models for their English pronunciation?

To answer the first question, I will ask the research participants to freely share their own opinion on the situations from which they personally feel to have acquired any aspects into their English pronunciation. From the answers, which I will look as a whole, I will search for similarities in the experiences in order to find the general answer to the first research question.

2. Are there differences in English pronunciation models by learners' gender or by proficiency level?

I will be able to divide the research participants and their answers in groups based firstly on their gender and secondly their proficiency level in English. After dividing the answers, I will look at the same answers used in previous questions in each group and compare them to the answers of their opposing group in order to find out if the answers differ from each other.

3. How important is the English teachers' role as a pronunciation model?

From the answers, I will analyse how often the participants mention specifically their teachers or formal learning situations in general as models for their English pronunciation. I will not lead the participants to mention formal learning situations in any way but rather focus on if the participants themselves see teachers and schools important in learning pronunciation.

3.2 Data

The data for this study was collected with a questionnaire with open-ended questions, which gave the participants the chance to tell about their opinions and experiences freely. The questionnaire was carried out in an Upper Secondary school in Kuopio, Eastern Finland in January of 2017 with two classes of 17-year-old students at A1-English course 5.

The questionnaire (available in the Appendix) I fabricated had two main questions. The first one asked the participants to tell about factors or situations that have helped them in learning English pronunciation. They were asked to name a specific factor or a situation and they were given a few lines to reason their decision if they wanted to do so. This question had five slots for the possible factors and included sub-questions to help the participants elaborate on when and why this specific factor has been helpful in their pronunciation learning process. Despite the question having five slots for answers, the participants were not required to fill all of them.

The second question of the questionnaire asked the participants to tell their own view on their English accent. The participants were asked to identify all possible accents they can detect in their speech and ponder which things have affected the formation of these accents.

Lastly, the questionnaire included background questions about the participants' gender and their latest course-grade in English. These background questions were used to answer the second research question to figure out if there are differences in learning situations between genders of proficiency levels. The questionnaire itself was conducted in Finnish to make sure that the participants do not left out any of their thoughts because they could not express it in English.

I received 57 answers in total. One of the answered questionnaires was omitted because the person did not answer the background questions. Out of the 56 participants eventually used in this study, 27 were girls and 29 were boys. The division of their latest English course grade is seen in Table 1.

Grade	Number of participants
5	4
6	13
7	12
8	17
9	10

Table 1. The latest course grade of the participants.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The questionnaire was chosen as a method of data collection because it provided the easiest opportunity to have a larger number of participants in the research. An interview was considered but I determined that it would have made the results biased as the number of participants would have been smaller due to time limitations. In addition, because the focus of this research is only on the models for pronunciation,

not the reasons for stating a specific situation as pronunciation model, no additional questions in the moment were not needed. Therefore, a questionnaire was concluded to be the best method.

After receiving the filled out questionnaires, I coded the answers of the first questions into four categories:

1. Inside the classroom. This category includes the situations where the participants mentioned the teacher's example, listening and general pronunciation exercises as models for their learning
2. Media. This category includes somewhat more traditional media, mainly TV series, movies and music, which the participants often grouped together in their answers.
3. Internet. This category includes mentions of games, video blogs or other media (e.g. news videos) that the participants mentioned they consume online.
4. Social situations. This category includes conversation exercises as well as social interactions outside the classroom.

Altogether the 56 participants mentioned 173 situations in their answers. I gathered the situations in their categories and calculated their percentage of the answers. These percentages can be seen in the table below.

Category	Percentage
Inside the classroom	22%
Media	38%
Internet	16%
Social situations	24%

Table 2. Percentage of answers in categories.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Models for English pronunciation

As we can see from the percentages in Table 2, all the groups are important in learning pronunciation and a clear answer to this question does not exist. More traditional media is percentwise the most popular category. However, the category of traditional media included more different situations or “sub-groups”, such as music, movies and TV-series, than for example in the social situations category. This need to be taken into account when looking at the results.

When reviewing the answers and separating different sub-groups from each other, I noticed that out of traditional media, movies and television series were mentioned more than music. One participant, who mentioned movies as their most important way of learning pronunciation, explained in their answer that the reason for movies’ importance for them is the fact that in Finland we use mostly subtitling over dubbing over the original sound. This participant figured that from watching a lot of movies they have over the years heard so much English that pronunciation comes automatically.

4.2. Differences in pronunciation models by gender or by proficiency level

After reviewing the answers, I came to the conclusion that there are no clear differences between genders or proficiency levels. Especially with genders there were no clear differences found (See table 3).

	Girls	Boys
Media	43%	40%
Classroom	22%	22%
Social situations	23%	23%
Internet	12%	15%

Table 3: Categories mentioned by participants, divided by gender

However, a couple of small differences emerged: Participants with lower grades seemed to be relying a little bit more on classroom activities and valued the teacher as

a model for pronunciation (see table 4). One of these participants with a lower proficiency level reasoned that they “probably have learned to pronounce some words with the help of movies or something” but stated that since it does not feel like learning, they “do not have their mind in the right place” and therefore do not focus on pronunciation in these situations and, thus, do not see it as a model for their pronunciation.

Grade	Mentioned classroom/teacher
5	75%
6	77%
7	67%
8	52%
9	40%

Table 4: Percentage of participants within the recent course grade-group who mentioned classroom activities or the teacher as a situation helping them in learning pronunciation.

In comparison, the participants with higher grades mentioned significantly more situations from their lives outside school. For example, almost all of the mentions of social situations and models/situations of learning were by participants with grades 8 or 9.

Despite these differences, I would not state that there is a clear division between proficiency levels. Every single group was mentioned among all grades and emphasises or preferences for a specific model were not strong enough to make any concrete statements.

4.3. English teachers’ role as a pronunciation model

Out of the 56 participants, 14 (25%) specifically mentioned a teacher as one of their models for pronunciation. These mentions were often reasoned by the teacher acting as a literal model in an exercise. This reflects the idea from Tergujeff (2013:46) that

imitation is one of the commonly used ways of teaching pronunciation. In addition to specifically mentioning the teacher, the rest of the answers within the “in the classroom” -group were related to exercises, not actually the teacher themselves. These usually were mentioned to be conversation activities, but one participant also mentioned more mechanical exercise relying on repetition of single words and not their use in different contexts or conversations.

5. DISCUSSION

When looking at the percentages of the different groups, we see that more traditional media is the most prominent group. However, it is important to remember that this is the groups that had the most sub-groups inside itself. When this is taken into account, I would say that all the groups are fairly even in importance to the learners. From this the natural takeaway is that when teaching we should really think about using different methods of teaching pronunciation. As we have also seen in the results of this research, there are small differences between different proficiency levels. In addition to all this, different personalities prefer different methods of teaching and models for their pronunciation.

Therefore, us teachers should somehow be able to implement as much media and authentic material as possible but also remember to use traditional methods, such as reading aloud and acting as literal models for our students. The use of all the different methods should also be balanced so that it ensures an equal learning environment for all different types of learners.

This brings us back to Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2015:43) list of the teacher's responsibilities, specifically the involvement in instruction. Szpyra-Kozłowska suggests that the teachers who get the most progress and the best results in their classrooms constantly devote extra time to review their students and take note on their personal problems and factors. Furthermore, these teachers are, according to Szpyra-Kozłowska, critical of their own teaching practices and themselves and work to improve at all times.

From the results of this research, I sense that, to answer my third research question, teacher is an important part of learning pronunciation but not in the traditional way anymore. Admittedly, the teacher acts as a literal model of pronunciation for some, but the role of the teacher in teaching pronunciation is changing to be more of a provider of other models. In a classroom this, to me, means that the teacher should focus on using different ways and a wide range of materials when teaching pronunciation. Authenticity and relevance to the learner are very important in this.

6. CONCLUSION

As we have learned in the research, there are many different factors that students themselves see as important to them when learning how to pronounce English. To be more aware of these differences, this research could be developed by increasing the number of participants or looking at different situations (for example music, movies, casual conversations, classroom activities) on their own. These changes could result in a clearer divide between different categories and possibly genders or proficiency groups and therefore would help us as teachers develop our lessons even more.

It is worth noting that the results of this research could also be very different if it had been conducted somewhere else. As this research has shown, there are students who value social situations as a model for learning pronunciation. However, since this research was conducted in Kuopio, which is not a particularly international city, the situations for using English in casual conversations are mostly limited between learners themselves. In another city, for example Helsinki, there are naturally more opportunities for international interactions and the results of this research could differ, especially when looking at the importance of social interactions

In conclusion, the ways in which Finnish speaking EFL-learners learn English pronunciation differ, possibly because of personalities or general interests, but it is a challenge and a responsibility for us as teachers to make sure that the material we give our learners correlates to these interests and helps the entire classroom to develop their

pronunciation skills. In order to do this we need to be involved and prepared to change our methods according to the groups we teach. However, we can get comfort in knowing that in our globalized world students are able to find ways to practice their skills outside of classroom, and many do so, taking at least a part of the responsibility of their learning into their own hands. It is a delicate balance of our and their responsibilities that give our students the best tools to make a great first impression on someone.

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APPENDIX

The questionnaire: Original Finnish version

1. TAUSTATIETOJA SINUSTA

Sukupuoli: poika ___ tyttö ___

Viimeisimmän englannin kurssin arvosana: ___

Vuosiluokka: ___

1. Mieti englannin kielen ääntämistäsi. Mitkä asiat/tilanteet ovat auttaneet tai toimineet mallina ääntämisen oppimisessa koulussa tai koulun ulkopuolella?

Asia/tilanne 1: _____

a) Milloin tämä asia oli tärkeä? Esimerkiksi, autoiko se ääntämisen oppimisessa heti englannin opiskelun alettua vai myöhemmin?

b) Miksi tämä asia on ollut sinulle tärkeä englannin ääntämisen oppimisessa? Esim. kuulemalla tai puhumalla oppiminen, toistaminen, tilanteen mielekkyys...

Asia/tilanne 2: _____

a) Milloin tämä asia oli tärkeä? Esimerkiksi, autoiko se ääntämisen oppimisessa heti englannin opiskelun alettua vai myöhemmin?

b) Miksi tämä asia on ollut sinulle tärkeä englannin ääntämisen oppimisessa? Esim. kuulemalla tai puhumalla oppiminen, toistaminen, tilanteen mielekkyys...

Asia/tilanne 3: _____

a) Milloin tämä asia oli tärkeä? Esimerkiksi, auttoiko se ääntämisen oppimisessa heti englannin opiskelun alettua vai myöhemmin?

b) Miksi tämä asia on ollut sinulle tärkeä englannin ääntämisen oppimisessa? Esim. kuulemalla tai puhumalla oppiminen, toistaminen, tilanteen mielekkyys...

Asia/tilanne 4: _____

a) Milloin tämä asia oli tärkeä? Esimerkiksi, auttoiko se ääntämisen oppimisessa heti englannin opiskelun alettua vai myöhemmin?

b) Miksi tämä asia on ollut sinulle tärkeä englannin ääntämisen oppimisessa? Esim. kuulemalla tai puhumalla oppiminen, toistaminen, tilanteen mielekkyys...

Asia/tilanne 5: _____

a) Milloin tämä asia oli tärkeä? Esimerkiksi, auttoiko se ääntämisen oppimisessa heti englannin opiskelun alettua vai myöhemmin?

b) Miksi tämä asia on ollut sinulle tärkeä englannin ääntämisen oppimisessa? Esim. kuulemalla tai puhumalla oppiminen, toistaminen, tilanteen mielekkyys...

2. Miten kuvailisit omaa englannin kielen ääntämistäsi? Puhutko esimerkiksi suomalaisittain (=suomalaisella korostuksella), brittiläisittäin, amerikkalaisittain vai eri korostusten/aksenttien sekoituksella? Vai onko puheessasi havaittavissa joku muu korostus?

Kerro jokaisesta havaitsemastasi korostuksesta. Mitkä asiat ovat mielestäsi vaikuttaneet kyseiseen korostukseen/aksenttiin englannin ääntämisessäsi? (esim. opettajien malli, elokuvat, kaverit, matkustelu)? _____

The questionnaire: English translation

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT YOU

Gender: boy ___ girl ___

The grade from your latest English course: ___

Grade level: ___

1. Think about your English pronunciation. Which situations/things have helped or acted as a model for you when learning pronunciation in or out of the school?

Thing/situation 1: _____

a) When was this important to you? For example, did it help you right after starting to learn English or later? _____

b) Why has this been important to you in learning English pronunciation? E.g. learning by hearing or speaking, repetition, the pleasantness of the situation...

Thing/situation 2: _____

a) When was this important to you? For example, did it help you right after starting to learn English or later? _____

b) Why has this been important to you in learning English pronunciation? E.g. learning by hearing or speaking, repetition, the pleasantness of the situation...

Thing/situation 3: _____

a) When was this important to you? For example, did it help you right after starting to learn English or later? _____

b) Why has this been important to you in learning English pronunciation? E.g. learning by hearing or speaking, repetition, the pleasantness of the situation...

Thing/situation 4: _____

a) When was this important to you? For example, did it help you right after starting to learn English or later? _____

b) Why has this been important to you in learning English pronunciation? E.g. learning by hearing or speaking, repetition, the pleasantness of the situation...

Thing/situation 5: _____

a) When was this important to you? For example, did it help you right after starting to learn English or later? _____

b) Why has this been important to you in learning English pronunciation? E.g. learning by hearing or speaking, repetition, the pleasantness of the situation...

2. How would you describe your English pronunciation? Do you speak for example in a Finnish way (=with a Finnish accent), British way, American way or a mixture of different accents? Or is there some other accent in your speech?

Tell about every accent you notice. Which factors have, in your own opinion, affected in that specific accent to be in your pronunciation? (e.g. teacher's example, movies, friends, travelling?) _____