

# English pronunciation teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools and its effect on students' confidence to speak English

Bachelor's thesis

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English

January 2019

<b>Tiedekunta – Faculty</b> Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen	<b>Laitos – Department</b> Kieli ja viestintätieteiden laitos
<b>Tekijä – Author</b> Oona Hamm	
<b>Työn nimi – Title</b> English pronunciation teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools and its effect on students' confidence to speak English	
<b>Oppiaine – Subject</b> Englanti	<b>Työn laji – Level</b> Kandidaatin tutkielma
<b>Aika – Month and year</b> Tammikuu 2019	<b>Sivumäärä – Number of pages</b> 22 + 1 liite
<b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b> <p>Ääntäminen on tärkeä osa kielitaitoa ja sen tärkeys korostuu erityisesti vieraita kieliä puhuttaessa. Ääntäminen vaikuttaa ymmärrettävyyteen ja puhetapa on ulkoisen olemuksen lisäksi yksi ensimmäisistä asioista, joihin ihmiset kiinnittävät huomiota tutustuessaan uusiin ihmisiin. Suomalaisessa lukiokoulutuksessa ääntämisen opetukseen ei kuitenkaan ole kiinnitetty paljoa huomiota, sillä ääntämistä tai puhetaitoja ei testata suomalaisessa ylioppilastutkinnossa.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli selvittää nykyisten pää- tai sivuaineenaan englantia opiskelevien yliopisto-opiskelijoiden kokemuksia ääntämisen opetuksesta lukiossa. Lisäksi tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää tuntevatko opiskelijat itsensä varmoiksi puhuessaan englantia sekä onko heidän lukiossa saamallaan ääntämisen opetuksella ollut vaikutusta itsevarmuuden kehittymiseen. Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin nettikyselyllä. Kysymykset käsittelivät opiskelijoiden kokemuksia ääntämisen opetuksesta lukiossa sekä heidän tuntemuksiaan koskien itsevarmuutta, kielenkäytön vaivattomuutta sekä valmiutta käyttää kieltä yllättävissä tilanteissa.</p> <p>Tutkimustuloksista selvisi, että suurin osa englannin yliopisto-opiskelijoista tuntee olonsa itsevarmaksi puhuessaan englantia, mutta huomattava määrä heistä kuitenkin koki lukiossa saamansa ääntämisen opetuksen puutteelliseksi. Suurimmaksi puutteeksi opiskelijat kokivat henkilökohtaisen palautteen ja ohjaamisen puuttumisen sekä opetuksen yksitoikkoisuuden. Oppilaiden itsevarmuus käyttää kieltä oli kehittynyt pääsääntöisesti koulun ulkopuolella. Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että ääntämisen opetuksen laatuun tulisi suomalaisessa lukiokoulutuksessa panostaa entistä enemmän ja sen tulisi olla yksilöllisempää sekä monipuolisempaa.</p>	
<b>Asiasanat – Keywords</b> pronunciation teaching, pronunciation instruction, confidence	
<b>Säilytyspaikka – Depository</b> JYX	
<b>Muita tietoja – Additional information</b>	

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

When we meet new people, perhaps from other cultures, an important part of the first impression is the way we speak. In addition, when we are learning to speak a new language, one of the most important features to get your speech to flow smoothly and thus to give a good first impression is to acquire sufficient pronunciation skills. It can even be said that pronunciation is one of the most noticeable features in one's speech. Especially when a non-native person is speaking a foreign language the interlocutors often concentrate on the distinctive pronunciation. People tend to judge others by their speaking skills and if one cannot pronounce correctly, others may not understand what is being said, and they might think that the speaker is incompetent in the language (Luoma 2004; Peltola, Lintunen and Tamminen 2014).

In addition to intelligibility, some scholars have argued that pronunciation skills can affect speakers' confidence to speak the language (Romova and Neville-Barton 2007; Atli and Bergil 2012; Peltola et al. 2014). In order to produce coherent speech, one must acquire some level of confidence in their language skills. Thus, the lack of pronunciation skills can create considerable communicational challenges to foreign language learners.

However, despite the importance of pronunciation, English pronunciation has often been neglected in teaching and research, because many teachers find it difficult to teach (Iivonen, Aulanko and Vainio 2005; Gilakjani 2012). In addition, many educational systems concentrate only on writing, reading and listening skills that are concretely tested and consequently pronunciation is excluded. For example, the matriculation exam in Finnish upper secondary education does not test pronunciation skills at all.

Lately more attention has been paid to pronunciation, but in Finland only few large-scale studies concerning English pronunciation teaching have been made (see Lintunen 2004, Iivonen et al. 2005, Tergujeff 2013). In addition, no previous study in Finland has directly concentrated on the influence of pronunciation teaching to students' confidence to speak English. The aim of this study is to find out what Finnish university students' perceptions on the pronunciation teaching they have received in upper secondary school are and whether the teaching they have received has affected their current speaking skills and their ability and confidence to speak English.

## **2 PRONUNCIATION TEACHING AND STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING SKILLS**

Oral skills are a part of our everyday lives and successful oral communication is a requirement for everyday life to run smoothly. According to Murphy (1991), oral communication includes speaking, listening and pronunciation. For any student of a foreign or a second language, speaking intelligibly is an essential part of one's goals in learning the language. In addition, listening is equally important if one desires to have a conversation or follow a lecture in the target language. Furthermore, pronunciation is a key element to intelligibility and is thus crucial to the development of both, speaking and listening skills. These skills often overlap and together they fall under the term of oral communication skills (Murphy 1991: 52). In this paper, I will mostly concentrate on two of the three, speaking skills and pronunciation. These skills and the linkage between pronunciation teaching and confidence are discussed in more detail in the following pages.

### **2.1 Speaking skills**

Speaking is one of the main ways of everyday communication. Speaking is not a single entity but a combination of multiple skills, which speakers must master. These skills include story formulation, articulation, pronunciation, self-monitoring and repair, automaticity, fluency, and turn-taking (Thornbury 2005: 2-9). In addition, to convey a message in the intended manner, speakers must know where to place stress and intonation in their speech (Zhang 2009: 32). Learning to speak a new language is not an easy challenge with all of its components.

According to Murphy (1991: 52), the capability to produce coherent and intelligent speech on a focused topic is an essential part of acquiring language skills. Luoma (2004: 9) points out that people often judge and make assumptions of others because of the way they speak. For some reason, errors in speech by native speakers are forgiven more easily than errors by non-native second or foreign language speakers. This can create difficulties to foreign language learners.

People tend to think that native speakers are aware of their mistakes whereas an erring non-native speaker seems clueless or unaware of the correct form of the language (Luoma 2004: 19). These notions indicate that good speaking skills are quite valuable to a foreign language learner if they want to be taken seriously.

However, speaking skills might not develop to the desired level if speaking is not acknowledged in teaching. According to Zhang (2009: 32), school teaching offers too few opportunities for students to speak the target language. In addition, the classroom teaching usually concentrates on grammar and vocabulary and exercises concentrate on writing, reading and listening separately. Al-Wossabi (2016: 2061) supports these views and argues that the lack of concentration on speaking skills in language teaching leads into students experiencing a high threshold to attend conversations or other opportunities to speak the target language.

## **2.2 Pronunciation**

Derwing and Munro (2015) define pronunciation as “All aspects of the oral production of language, including segments, prosody, voice quality, and rate” (Derwing and Munro 2015: 5). Thus, pronunciation is not only saying the word correctly but also with the right rhythm, intonation, stress, quality of voice et cetera. It can be said that pronunciation is an important aspect of any language. Pronunciation reveals a lot about an individual; it can show one’s nationality, status, and other parts of one’s identity (Rogerson-Revell 2011: 4-5). In the English language pronunciation is quite complicated, because the spelled form of a word does not usually correspond with the spoken form (Rogerson-Revell 2011: 26). This creates a great deal of difficulties to some learners of English and especially to those whose mother tongue has a better correspondence for spoken and written form.

Almost every recent paper that has been written on pronunciation acknowledges the importance of pronunciation to intelligibility (e.g. Tlazalo Tejeda and Basurto Santos 2014; Peltola et al. 2014; Gilakjani, 2012; Rogerson-Revell 2011). People tend to judge others by their speaking skills and if one cannot pronounce correctly, it inevitably affects their oral communication skills (Peltola et al. 2014: 87). It is not that rare that pronunciation errors come in the way of oral communication (Derwing and Munro 2015: 2). Thus, pronunciation is a crucial part of language skills. The

following part of this paper moves on to describe in greater detail the position of pronunciation in English teaching.

### **2.2.1 Pronunciation teaching**

The current goal of language teaching seems to be intelligibility instead of perfectionism in all areas of language. As explained in the previous sections, it is clear that pronunciation skills are crucial for intelligibility. According to Rogerson-Revell (2011: 5) native speakers are not as sensitive to errors in lexis or syntax as they are to errors in pronunciation. Thus, one might consider that pronunciation ought to be an integral part of language teaching. However, pronunciation has often been neglected in teaching, because many teachers find it difficult to teach (Iivonen et al. 2005: 46; Rogerson-Revell 2011: 237).

Henderson et al. (2012) carried out an extensive online survey on English pronunciation teaching, The English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey (the EPTiES) and found out that many European teachers of English feel that pronunciation teaching is challenging because no training to teach pronunciation has been provided to them. This view is supported by Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos (2014: 155), who state that many current teachers directly confess their lack of knowledge on pronunciation. Furthermore, Gilakjani (2012: 1) notes that even the guidelines of language teaching often leave the questions of what, when and how to teach pronunciation unanswered.

However, regardless of the difficulties they experience when teaching pronunciation, teachers are always unconsciously teaching it by their input in the classroom. Students tend to adopt and imitate their teachers' pronunciation (Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos 2014: 153). In addition, despite the lack of knowledge on how to teach pronunciation, the teachers in the EPTiES rated pronunciation to be as important as other language skills, such as writing or reading (Henderson et al. 2012: 10). Similarly, to the EPTiES results, Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos (2014) found out that not enough time is devoted to pronunciation teaching.

In addition to teachers' views, it is necessary to consider students' views on the importance of pronunciation teaching. Gilakjani (2012: 3) argues that some students bluntly state that pronunciation learning is an irrelevant waste of time and in their view, it is enough to be

understood. Tlazalo Tejeda and Basurto Santos (2014: 161) have pointed out that in learning oral communication skills in a foreign language (FL), students might need more time to fully understand the information they are taught in order to put it into effect. Furthermore, they suggest that in order to reduce the ignorance towards pronunciation mistakes and students' negligence towards pronunciation the exercises used to learn pronunciation should be more diverse and invigorating (2014: 161). Having discussed pronunciation teaching in general, the section below moves on to describe English pronunciation teaching in Finland.

### **2.2.2 Pronunciation teaching in Finland**

In Finland, English has no official status, but it is studied as a foreign language (EFL) and most students study English at least nine years during their time in school (Tergujeff 2013: 11). Despite the amount of time used studying the language pronunciation teaching has been widely neglected. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015 (Finnish National Board of Education 2015) emphasizes the importance of learning communication skills in foreign languages, but it fails to mention anything about pronunciation.

Furthermore, the research done on English pronunciation teaching in Finland is minor. However, some scholars have acknowledged the negligence towards English pronunciation teaching. In 2004, Lintunen studied university students' development in pronunciation and phonetic transcription skills during a one-year pronunciation course. The students' skills in pronunciation and transcription were tested three times during the course and Lintunen found out that pronunciation and transcription skills correlate with each other. Furthermore, he concluded that the Finnish school system does not focus enough on pronunciation teaching. In addition, Iivonen et al. (2005) supported Lintunen's claims and his study revealed that EFL teachers experience several difficulties in pronunciation teaching, which results in not teaching it at all. Many teachers prefer to teach reading or writing instead.

The most large-scale study on English pronunciation teaching in Finland has been carried out by Elina Tergujeff (2013). Her findings add more to Lintunen and Iivonen et al., because she found out that pronunciation teaching in Finland is limited and it does not follow the current recommendations. In addition, phonetic training is minimal and phonetic symbols are hardly



taught at all (Tergujeff 2013). After Tergujeff's pioneering study, other Finnish scholars have also paid attention to pronunciation teaching. Peltola et al. (2014) carried out an experiment on the effect of explicit pronunciation instruction on advanced English students' vowel quality. Their findings show that teaching pronunciation explicitly is indeed beneficial for the learners and can help them produce native like vowel sounds. In addition, many BA and MA theses have concentrated on pronunciation teaching (e.g. Vaarala 2010, Rajamäki 2016, Oksanen 2016, Puskala 2016, Roivainen 2018).

Based on the findings of the previously mentioned scholars, it can be said that pronunciation teaching in Finland has generally been implicit and lacking. In addition, it seems that conscious concentration on pronunciation instruction could indeed help students develop their language skills. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the views of university students of English on the pronunciation teaching they have received in their upper secondary school. In addition, it tries to find out what the effects of the pronunciation teaching are to students' confidence as speakers of English. So far, this paper has focused on pronunciation teaching. The following section will discuss the linkage between students' confidence and pronunciation teaching.

### **2.3 Students' confidence and pronunciation teaching**

Overall, very little attention has been paid to the relationship between pronunciation teaching and speaking skills development. Among the Finnish research, I did not find any studies that would directly concentrate on the influence of pronunciation teaching to students' confidence to speak English. However, scholars in other countries have addressed the issue. Atli and Bergil (2012) studied directly the effects of pronunciation instruction to EFL students' overall speaking skills and found that conscious pronunciation instruction can increase students' confidence in their oral skills. In addition, Romova and Neville-Barton's study on oral skills development (2007) suggests similar connections.

In Atli and Bergil's study (2012) students received pronunciation instruction for five weeks. In the beginning of the study the researchers used a picture strip story, which the students had to read and record. Then they attended a pronunciation instruction course for five weeks and recorded the story again. In addition, the researchers used a questionnaire to gain information about students'

views on pronunciation. The results of their study suggest that the lack of concentration to pronunciation instruction might result in students' not achieving pronunciation skills at all even though they would have studied the language for a considerable time, for example nine years. It was also found that many of the students were not satisfied with their pronunciation and that they were not aware of the English sound structure (Atli and Bergil 2012: 3670). After the instruction period the students' felt that their speaking skills and knowledge of the English sound system had improved. Thus, the results of Atli and Bergil's study suggest that pronunciation instruction does indeed help students to gain confidence in their oral communication skills.

In addition, Romova and Neville-Barton (2007) studied four adult English as Additional Language (EAL) students in their BA tertiary studies in New Zealand for three years. One of the main strands of the BA program was language development including oral skills development. The study did not directly concentrate on the effects of pronunciation teaching to students' oral skills, but the teaching included also pronunciation instruction. The results show that after their three years of studies the students felt that their confidence in oral skills had increased. This suggests that conscious concentration on language development including pronunciation development can increase students' confidence in their oral skills. However, the small scale of the study prevents further generalizations.

These views are also supported by Gilakjani (2012:10) who states that explicit pronunciation teaching helps students to communicate more easily and effectively in the target language. In addition, Peltola et al. (2014) state that conscious focus on pronunciation instruction helps students to gain more native-like pronunciation. This in turn increases learners' confidence to speak English.

As mentioned above, many authors speak on the behalf of pronunciation teaching (e.g. Tlazalo Tejeda and Basurto Santos 2014; Peltola et al. 2014; Gilakjani, 2012; Rogerson-Revell 2011). In addition, some studies (e.g. Peltola et al. 2014; Atli and Bergil 2012; Gilakjani 2012) have shown that conscious concentration on pronunciation instruction results in a better level of pronunciation. However, few studies have addressed the link between pronunciation teaching and development of confidence. In addition, none of them have been conducted in Finland. The present study aims to fill in that gap.

## **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

The aim of the present study was to find out university students' perceptions on English pronunciation teaching in Finland and its effects on students' confidence as speakers of English.

The research questions are:

1. What are the views of university students of English on the pronunciation teaching they have received in their upper secondary school?
2. Do students feel that the pronunciation teaching they have received in the upper secondary school has affected their confidence as speakers of English and if they do, what are those effects like?

### **3.2 Participants**

The data was gathered via an online questionnaire in a Finnish university in May 2018. The questions dealt with students' experiences on pronunciation teaching and their feelings about confidence when speaking English, the effortlessness of language usage and their readiness to use the language in surprising situations. The questionnaire was posted on a Facebook page of an English subject association. In addition, it was sent via email to all students of English at the particular university. Thus, any student of English within the university had access to it.

Participation was voluntary and altogether thirty-eight students answered the questionnaire. Thirty-one of the respondents were major students of English and six were minors. In addition, there was one respondent who identified as a former major student of English. The respondents were 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> year students and their age ranged from 20 to 30 years. Twenty-nine of the respondents were women, eight were men and one identified as neither one. As background information it was asked in which region the respondents went to upper secondary school and from

the nineteen Finnish regions the answers included twelve. Thus, the respondents covered almost every part of Finland.

### **3.3 Data and analysis**

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) comprised Likert scale questions, which all required a rationale. The reason for including a requirement for a rationale for each Likert scale question is the fact that students' personal opinions and views on the issue were considered important. The reason for using a questionnaire as a data gathering method instead of, for example, an interview, is the fact that through a questionnaire a greater variety of people could be reached than would have been by doing interviews. In addition, online questionnaires are very efficient, and the data procession is quicker than in an interview (Dörnyei 2007: 115). Due to the use of Likert scale questions and open-ended rationale questions, the data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. However, the main focus was on the qualitative analysis.

## **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the questionnaire the students were asked whether they feel confident or not when speaking English and based on their answers they have been separated into two groups for the analysis: those who feel uncertain about speaking English and those who feel confident about speaking English. However, this division did not have a visible effect in all the questions, because many students had similar views despite the quantity of confidence they had. Yet, the division was kept in order to stay focused on the research aim and questions.

### **4.1 Pronunciation teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools**

Most of the students recalled that they had received some sort of pronunciation instruction during their time in the upper secondary school. However, as many as 16% of the respondents felt that they had not received any kind of pronunciation teaching and a few students (8%) did not know whether they had received pronunciation instruction or not. These findings are concerning when considering the significance of pronunciation to language competence (see e.g. Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos 2014; Peltola et al. 2014; Gilakjani 2012; Rogerson-Revell 2011).

Figure 1 shows what kind of pronunciation teaching methods the students had come across in their upper secondary education. The most common ways of teaching were oral pair and group work, reading aloud and repeating after teacher. It seems that in most cases the pronunciation instruction was very traditional and integrated in other exercises. Some students (16%) had received other type of instruction. For example, recording one's own speech, being exposed to different types of pronunciation in class or the teacher simply lecturing about correct pronunciation. Only 18% of the students had learned the phonetic alphabet and become aware of the English sound structure. This correlates with the findings of Atli and Bergil (2012), who also found out that students in their study were not aware of the English sound structure.

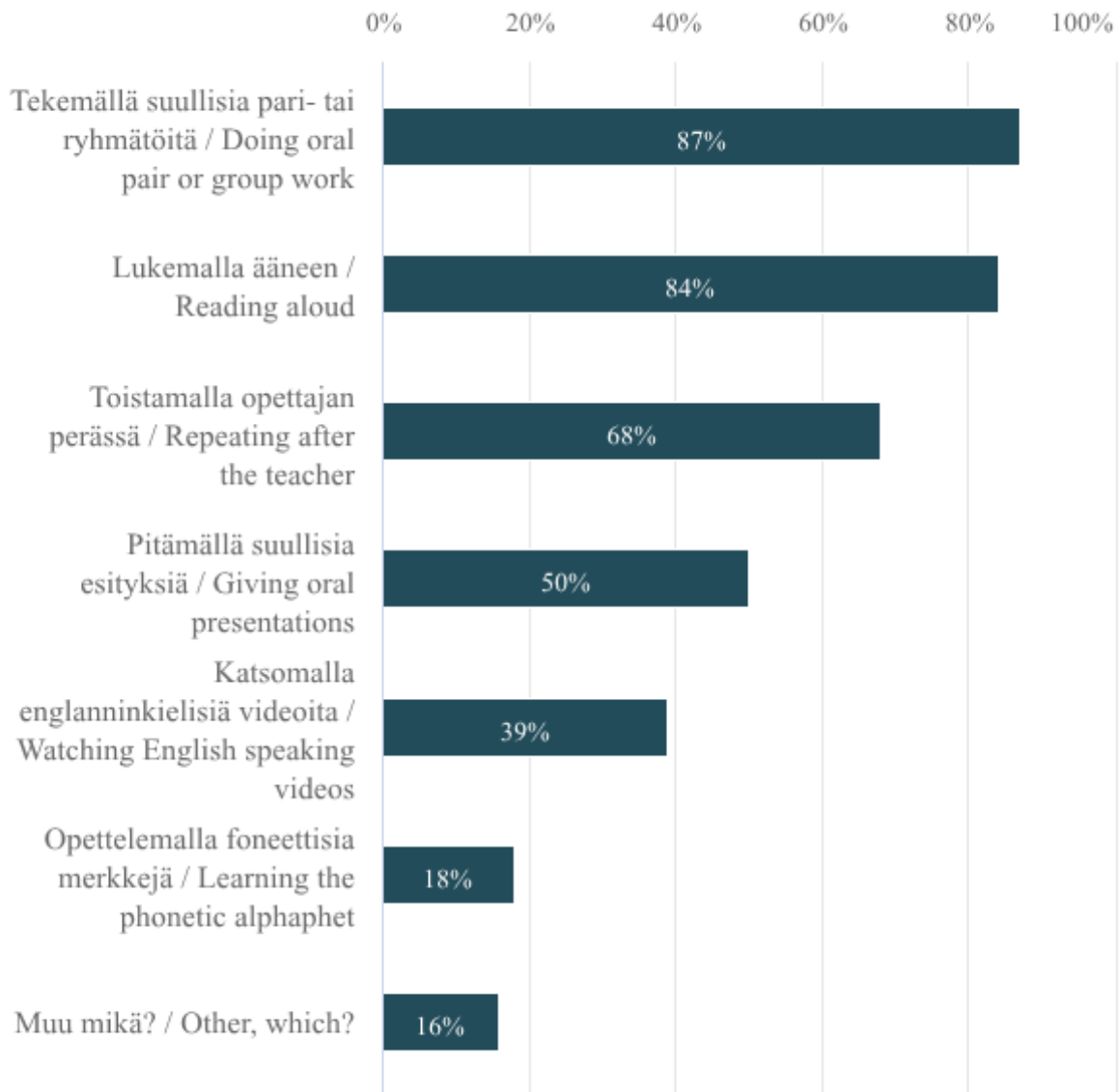


Figure 1: In which ways was pronunciation taught in your upper secondary school?

Surprisingly, some of those who recalled not receiving any kind of pronunciation instruction had ticked some of the ways of pronunciation teaching. Perhaps these respondents did not see the presented pronunciation teaching methods as explicit instruction and thus answered that they did not receive any instruction concerning pronunciation. However, it seems that in most cases pronunciation was indeed taught.

#### **4.1.1 Level of satisfaction towards the teaching methods**

Even though many students had received pronunciation instruction, almost 40% of them were dissatisfied with the teaching methods. In addition, many of those who felt some level of satisfaction still wished that there had been more communicational and explicit exercises, more feedback, more authenticity, regularity and creativity in the teaching of pronunciation. Furthermore, also those respondents who stated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (26%) felt that there could have been more concentration on pronunciation. This supports the views of Tlazalo Tejeda and Basurto Santos (2014) who proposed that pronunciation exercises should be more diverse and invigorating in order to be effective.

As one criticism all the groups mentioned the lack of feedback. Students would have wanted to receive personal feedback on their pronunciation from their teacher. Some mentioned that they had to do a lot of independent work later in life in order to learn out of the incorrect ways of pronunciation. There was no noticeable divergence in the answers between the confident and the uncertain group and the uncertain group also mentioned the lack of explicit teaching, oral practices and feedback.

There were also few students (8%) who said that they were completely satisfied with the teaching methods. However, they stated that pronunciation should have been in order before coming to upper secondary school and thus they were satisfied with the teaching, whether pronunciation was taught or not. Other reasons for being satisfied were the use of phonetic transcription and guidance from the teacher when mistakes were made. One satisfied respondent had even had teachers who had helped her with pronunciation after classes.

In some Finnish upper secondary schools an optional oral communication course has been offered, which the students have been free to choose as a part of their elective courses. Only ten people out of thirty-eight in this study recalled taking the optional course, but most of them stated that the course did not include any explicit pronunciation practice, but only oral communication and oral presentations, which did help to improve one's pronunciation too. Most of those who had taken the course (eight out of ten) felt that it was useful because it was the only course where speaking was truly practiced. These findings back up Zhang's (2009) and Al-Wossabi's (2016) views on school teaching not offering enough possibilities to practice speaking the language.

Most of the respondents were strongly or somewhat satisfied with the pronunciation of their upper secondary school teachers. Many mentioned that their teachers had native or native-like pronunciation. In addition, some mentioned that their teachers' pronunciation was good, but clearly Finnish. However, this was not mentioned as a negative aspect, but a positive way of showing students the variety of English pronunciation. A few respondents recalled that teachers spoke more Finnish than English. A couple of respondents were somewhat dissatisfied and stated as their reasons that their teachers' pronunciation was lazy, or their Finnish accent was too audible.

These results suggest that even though pronunciation has been taught, satisfaction towards the teaching methods varies considerably. Over one third of the students were dissatisfied with the teaching methods and majority of all the students felt that the teaching was not as good as it could have been. Many felt that there were not enough possibilities offered to practice speaking or pronunciation. In addition, the unsuitable teaching methods had caused far-reaching problems for some students.

#### **4.1.2 Overall level of satisfaction with pronunciation teaching**

Overall, only two people felt that pronunciation teaching had been excellent in their upper secondary school. In their schools, teachers had been interested in the subject and the teaching was diverse. Eleven respondents felt that pronunciation teaching had been fairly good. Some mentioned that the teaching itself was good, but it was irregular. As many as 32% of the students felt that pronunciation teaching had not been good, but not poor either. However, many of them rationalized their answer by stating that there was no pronunciation teaching, or it was very implicit. In addition, 34% of the respondents felt that pronunciation teaching was not very good. The students felt that there was too little of it and feedback or intervention by the teacher was missing completely.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, many teachers feel unsure about teaching pronunciation (Iivonen et al. 2005; Henderson et al. 2012; Tlazalo Tejada and Basurto Santos 2014). It seems that the students' answers correlate with this. Many students in the present study felt that there was no pronunciation teaching at all or it was poor. Perhaps this is the consequence of teachers' uncertainty when it comes to teaching pronunciation.



Only 5% of the students participating in the study were completely satisfied with the pronunciation teaching they had received during their years in upper secondary school. These results reveal a lot about the state of pronunciation teaching in Finland. Even those who felt that the teaching they had received was fairly good were hoping for more versatility.

In addition, it seems that majority of the students has learned pronunciation more outside of school (Figure 2). Only 5% of the students felt that they had learned pronunciation more in school. However, 19% people felt that they do not know whether they have learned pronunciation more in or outside of school. These results confirm that there are notable issues in the school teaching of pronunciation. Few students felt that they had learned pronunciation more at school.

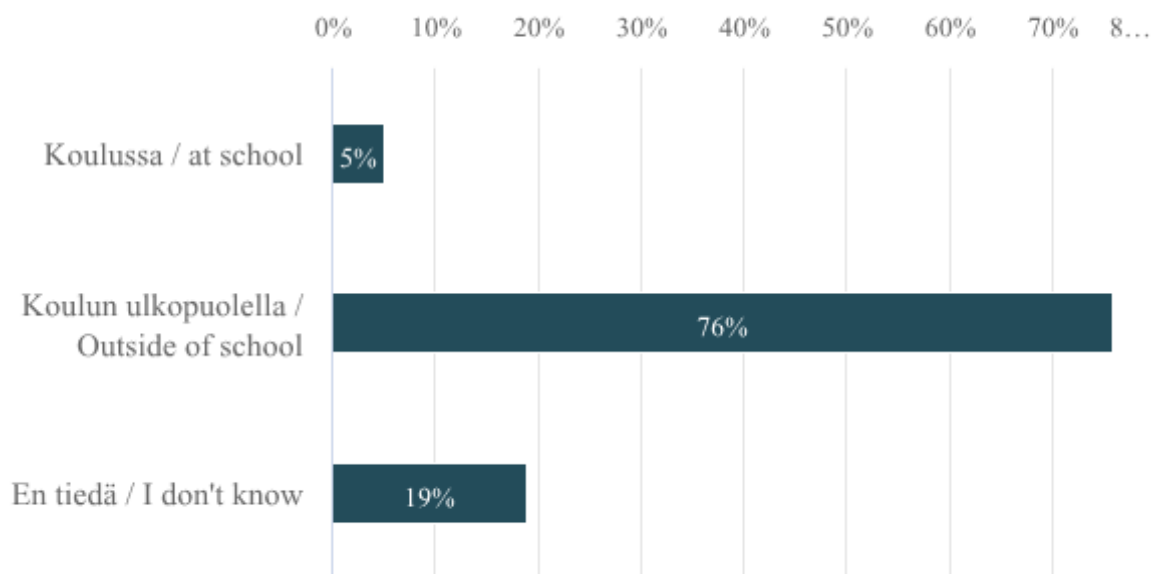


Figure 2: Have you learned pronunciation more in school or outside of school?

Furthermore, all the confident students had gained their competence outside of school, which raises the question whether the upper secondary facilities are capable of providing its students with the possibilities to practice all skills included in language competence. It cannot be a presumption that all students have a possibility to practice speaking in their private lives, e.g. by travelling abroad. Nor is it fair to require these students to use their free time to practice speaking and pronunciation

alone. Educational facilities should provide the steady basis and what happens in students' private lives is supplemental.

It seems that university students of English are generally not satisfied with the pronunciation teaching they have received in upper secondary school. Not all have received pronunciation teaching and majority of those who have are not satisfied with the methods and amount of it. These results back up Iivonen et al. (2005) and Tergujeff's (2013) studies and the findings of many BA and MA theses (Vaarala 2010; Rajamäki 2016; Oksanen 2016; Puskala 2016; Roivainen 2018), which suggest that pronunciation teaching in Finland is lacking.

## **4.2 Confidence when speaking English**

Pronunciation teaching does not only affect intelligibility, but it can also have an effect on students' confidence to speak the language (Atli and Bergil 2012, Romova and Neville-Barton 2007). In the present study, out of thirty-eight respondents only six felt uncertain about speaking English. This was no surprise, because most of the respondents were majors of English. The rationales for not being confident about speaking English were distinct and included reasons such as insecurity with pronunciation, grammar and choice or formulation of words. In addition, some respondents felt that they had not had enough possibilities to practice speaking the language. Furthermore, one respondent stated that pronunciation had always felt difficult for her/him.

The most common reasons for being confident about speaking English seem to be the knowledge of the language and trust in one's skills. These aspects were mentioned multiple times. In addition, speaking English daily, often or for a long time was mentioned frequently and some emphasized that speaking English feels natural to them. A few respondents mentioned that ignoring errors in speech or being more accepting towards them had increased their confidence. Furthermore, such rationales as context, having lived abroad, positive feedback from native speakers, self-conscious development of one's language skills, interest in the language, and teaching experience were all mentioned regularly.

These findings back up Zhang's (2009) and Al-Wossabi's (2016) studies, which both argued that school teaching offers too few opportunities for students to speak the target language. The uncertain students felt that there were not enough possibilities offered to practice pronunciation at

school, which has made them feel uncertain about their language skills. In addition, the confident ones had become confident through possibilities to use the language in their private lives instead of school. However, both groups mentioned pronunciation as a factor for the development of confidence. Whereas some of the uncertain speakers felt that pronunciation problems prevent them from being confident, some of the confident speakers felt that not stressing about pronunciation and accepting occasional mistakes helped them to be more confident. Furthermore, Al-Wossabi (2016) claimed that the lack of concentration on speaking skills in school prevents students from using the target language later in their lives.

It can thus be suggested that the development of confidence may have something to do with students' attitude towards those factors that might usually be interpreted as flaws in one's language competence. For example, the above-mentioned mistakes in pronunciation are possibly interpreted as lack of knowledge or skill by the uncertain group, whereas the members of the confident group may see them as natural parts of language usage. This exact view was also brought up by Luoma (2004: 19) who pointed out that people often tend to think that an erring non-native speaker seems clueless or unaware of the correct form of the language. Perhaps students' confidence does not develop to the desired direction as long as their attitude reminds the model presented by Luoma.

### **4.3 English: easy or difficult?**

One might consider that the experience of uncertainty when speaking a foreign language makes it also feel difficult to speak the language, but surprisingly in the present study only one of the uncertain speakers felt that speaking English is somewhat difficult. Likewise, only one student felt that speaking English is not easy but not difficult either. These respondents both felt that their speech was usually understandable, but their reasons for not being confident were mistakes in certain phonemes, grammar mistakes, overthinking and overall anxiety when speaking.

Most of the members of the uncertain group felt that speaking English is somewhat easy and one even felt it to be very easy. One respondent mentioned that she has spoken English for fifteen years and thus speaking comes naturally for her. However, she felt that speaking feels sometimes like translating Finnish into English. Others felt that speaking English is usually easy despite occasional mistakes. In addition, one respondent felt that her wide knowledge of vocabulary makes

it easy for her to attend conversations in English. One respondent felt that speaking is not difficult at all and sometimes words and sentence structures come into mind more easily in English. These findings suggest that even if students feel that they are uncertain about speaking English they might still think that speaking the language is rather easy.

Almost all the confident respondents thought that speaking English is very or somewhat easy. Only one respondent felt it to be somewhat difficult. In his rationale he mentioned the difficulties he experiences in small talk, which is common among Finns because of cultural differences. Many of the confident speakers mentioned that speaking English is usually easy, yet still one quarter of them felt that there were some occasions when it feels difficult. Changing situational factors, such as the country or the person one talks to were brought up by some students. In addition, surprising situations which request odd vocabulary were described as challenging.

The most frequently mentioned reasons for English being easy were daily or regular usage of the language, possibilities to use the language in private life and getting exposed to it daily. A few people described English as an easy language and they felt that it had always been easy, because of their good language skills. It is curious how the confident students concentrated on giving reasons why speaking is not always easy in all situations even though they had all previously stated that they are confident when speaking English. Vice versa, most of the uncertain group concentrated on presenting reasons to explain why speaking is easy. There was only one person in both groups that gave a deviant answer. Thus, it can be suggested that confidence and feelings of ease when speaking a language are not linked together in students' minds – at least not explicitly.

#### **4.4 Students' satisfaction towards their pronunciation skills and effortlessness of language usage**

Satisfaction towards one's pronunciation skills and the ability to speak effortlessly might be associated with confidence. In the present study, almost all members of the confident group felt that they are strongly or somewhat satisfied in their pronunciation skills. One respondent felt strongly dissatisfied. Based on the rationales provided, it seems like satisfaction on one's pronunciation skills comes from conscious practice and constant usage of the language. This

supports Peltola et al.'s (2014) findings that pronunciation instruction has positive effects to the development of students' speaking skills and confidence.

However, many of those answering "somewhat satisfied" had chosen the answer because they felt that they had something to improve: the most often mentioned reasons were issues with certain sounds or intonation and occasional mistakes. In addition, few felt that they could be better if they had more practice. Moreover, mixing accents or audible Finnish accent bothered some. Members of the uncertain group were less satisfied in their pronunciation skills, but there was no divergence in the rationales between the confident and the uncertain group. Similarly, the uncertain group mentioned problems with certain sounds and mixing of accents.

Almost all the confident speakers felt that they can speak English effortlessly in unexpected situations. The most often mentioned reason for being able to speak English effortlessly was experience. In addition, the ability to adapt quickly and the ability to speak English and Finnish as well were mentioned few times. Reasons for not being able to use English effortlessly were the element of surprise and subject of discussion. Two of the uncertain respondents felt that they can speak English effortlessly in unexpected situations and three chose the option "I don't know". Only one respondent felt incapable of speaking English effortlessly. It seems like uncertainty does not necessarily lead to not being able to handle surprising situations. It seems that reasons for answering "no" or "I don't know" had all something to do with the individual's overall challenges in surprising situations.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The objective of the present study was to find out what the views of university students of English are on the pronunciation teaching they have received in their former upper secondary schools. Furthermore, the study aimed at finding out whether pronunciation teaching has consequences to the development of students' confidence to speak English. These aspects were considered as important topics for research because pronunciation teaching and its far-reaching effects to students' language competence have generally been ignored in Finnish upper secondary education.

The findings show that most of the university students of English feel confident about speaking English, but the pronunciation teaching they have received in upper secondary school has been insufficient and they have gained their confidence to use English by using it in their private lives instead of school. In addition, the uncertain students who did not feel confident about speaking English pointed out that there were not enough possibilities at school to practice speaking and thus their confidence to use English was low. The major problem in school teaching in most students' opinion was the monotonous practices and the lack of personal guidance and feedback from the teacher. These results show that pronunciation teaching in Finnish upper secondary education should be more individual-centered and diverse in methods.

These findings are in line with the background literature: for example, the results of many scholars (e.g. Iivonen et al. 2005; Rogerson-Revell 2011; Tergujeff 2013) on the inadequacy of pronunciation teaching of English are confirmed by this study. In addition, all those students who had consciously practiced pronunciation in their private lives or in rare occasions with the guidance of a teacher felt that their confidence to speak English had increased, because of the frequent or concentrated instruction. These findings are in line with Romova and Neville-Barton's (2007), Atli and Bergil's (2012), Peltola et. al.'s (2014), and Gilakjani's (2012) findings, which all state that conscious concentration on pronunciation practice does indeed increase students' confidence to speak English.

However, there are some limitations to be considered in this study. There were only thirty-eight participants and they were all from the same university. Thus, it cannot be generalized that these views are the views of all university students in Finland. Furthermore, the study could have had a deeper insight into students' opinions if the data was gathered through interviews instead of a

questionnaire. Further research could concentrate on finding out more and comprehensive information about the connections between the development of confidence and language competence. In addition, the role of attitudes could be examined further.

The findings of the present study show what kind of far-reaching effects lacking pronunciation teaching can have. These effects extend to much further than only the classroom. The lack of pronunciation teaching can designate how students view the importance of pronunciation and how they feel about their speaking skills generally. Furthermore, without adequate possibilities to practice speaking English in the classroom students have to gain their confidence to speak the language from outside of school. Despite the prolonged negligence towards pronunciation, it is clear that language teaching should pay more attention to it.

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## APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

### **Kysely englannin kielen puhe- ja ääntämistaidoista** **Questionnaire on English speaking and pronunciation skills**

Arvoisa vastaaja,

Tällä kyselyllä kerään tietoa kandidaatin tutkielmaani varten. Tutkielmani koskee nykyisten yliopisto-opiskelijoiden mielipiteitä ja kokemuksia englannin kielen puhetaitojen ja ääntämisen opetuksesta suomalaisessa lukio-opetuksessa. Kysely koostuu sekä monivalinta- että avoimista kysymyksistä. Kyselyssä ei ole oikeita tai väärä vastauksia ja toivon, että vastaat kysymyksiin rehellisesti. Kysely on jaettu kahteen osioon ja ensimmäisessä osiossa pyydän sinua miettimään nykyisiä englannin puhe- ja ääntämistaitojasi ja vastaamaan kysymyksiin niiden pohjalta. Toisessa osiossa pyydän, että pohdit lukiossa saamaasi opetusta ja vastaat kysymyksiin niiden pohjalta.

Kaikkia keräämiäni tietoja käytetään anonyymisti pelkästään tutkielmaani varten, eikä vastauksia voida yhdistää yksittäisiin henkilöihin. Taustatietoja käytetään vain tilastollisten eroavaisuuksien huomioimiseen. Kyselyyn vastaamiseen kuluu aikaa n. 15-20 minuuttia riippuen vastaustesi pituudesta.

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Dear respondent,

I am gathering data for my bachelor's thesis, which is concerned with university students' opinions and experiences on English speaking skills and pronunciation teaching in Finnish upper secondary school teaching. The questionnaire consists of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. There are no right, or wrong answers and I hope you will answer the questions truthfully. The questionnaire is divided into two sections and in the first section I ask you to think about your current speaking and pronunciation skills and answer the questions based on them. In the second section, I ask you to consider the teaching you have received in your upper secondary school and answer the questions based on your experiences there.

All the information gathered will be used confidentially for the thesis and the answers cannot be linked to anyone. The background information is only used to see statistical differences. Answering the questionnaire will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes depending on the length of your answers.

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Mikäli teillä on jotain kysyttävää, voitte olla yhteydessä minuun sähköpostilla / If you have any further questions you can contact me via email: oona.r.j.hamm@student.jyu.fi

Kiittäen / Kind regards

Oona Hamm

**Taustatiedot / Background information**

**1. Oletko englannin pää- vai sivuaineopiskelija? / Are you a major or minor student of English?**

- Pääaineopiskelija / Major student
- sivuaineopiskelija / Minor student
- Muu, mikä? / Other, which? \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Opintovuosi / Year of studies**

1. vuoden opiskelija / 1st year student
2. vuoden opiskelija / 2nd year student
3. vuoden opiskelija / 3rd year student
4. vuoden opiskelija / 4rd year student
5. vuoden opiskelija / 5th year student
- Muu, mikä? / Other, which? \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Syntymävuosi / Year of birth****4. Sukupuoli / Gender**

- Mies
- Nainen
- Muu

**5. Maakunta, jossa suoritit lukion / Region where you went to upper secondary school**

- Ahvenanmaa
- Etelä-Karjala
- Etelä-Pohjanmaa
- Etelä-Savo
- Kainuu
- Kanta-Häme
- Keski-Pohjanmaa
- Keski-Suomi
- Kymenlaakso
- Lappi
- Pirkanmaa
- Pohjanmaa
- Pohjois-Karjala
- Pohjois-Pohjanmaa
- Pohjois-Savo
- Päijät-Häme
- Satakunta
- Uusimaa
- Varsinais-Suomi

**Kyselyn ensimmäinen osio alkaa tästä. Vastatessasi tämän sivun kysymyksiin pyydän sinua pohtimaan nykyisiä englannin kielen puhumisen ja ääntämisen taitojasi ja vastaamaan kysymyksiin niiden pohjalta.**

**The first set of the questions begins here. When answering the questions on this page, please consider your current speaking and pronunciation skills and give your answers based on them.**

**6. Tunnetko itsesi varmaksi puhuessasi englantia? / Do you feel confident when speaking**

**English?**

Kyllä / Yes

En / No

**7. Miksi? Perustele vastauksesi / Why? Please give reasons for your answer**

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**8. Täydennä seuraava lause / Complete the following statement:**

	Erittäin vaikeaa / Very difficult	Melko vaikeaa / Somewhat difficult	Ei helppoa eikä vaikeaa / Not easy or difficult	Melko helppoa / Somewhat easy	Erittäin helppoa / Very easy
Englannin kielen puhuminen on mielestäni... / To me speaking English is...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**9. Miksi? Perustele vastauksesi / Why? Please give reasons for your answer**

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**10. Käyttäen seuraavaa arvoasteikkoa, arvioi kuinka tyytyväinen olet nykyiseen englannin kielen ääntämisen tasoon / Using the following scale please rate how satisfied you are with your current level of English pronunciation skills?**

			3. Ei tyytyväinen eikä		
		2.	tyytymätön/ Not satisfied nor	4.	
	1. Erittäin tyytymätön/ Strongly dissatisfied	Jokseenkin tyytymätön/ Somewhat dissatisfied		Jokseenkin tyytyväinen/ Somewhat satisfied	5. Erittäin tyytyväinen/ Strongly satisfied
Olen.../ I am...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**11. Perustele vastauksesi / Please give reasons for your answer**

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**12. Koetko pystyväsi puhumaan englantia vaivattomasti yllättävissäkin tilanteissa? / Do you feel that you can speak English effortlessly even in unexpected situations?**

- Kyllä / Yes
- En / No
- En tiedä / I don't know

**13. Perustele vastauksesi / Please give reasons for your answer**

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**Kyselyn toinen osio alkaa tästä. Muista miettiä lukiossa saamaasi opetusta, kun vastaat näihin kysymyksiin.**

**The second set of questions starts here. When answering these questions remember to think about your upper secondary school experiences.**

**14. Opetettiin sinulle ääntämistä lukiossa? / Did you receive pronunciation teaching in your former upper secondary school?**

- Kyllä / Yes
- Ei / No
- En tiedä / I don't know

**15. Millä tavoin ääntämistä opetettiin lukiossasi? / In which ways was pronunciation taught in your school?**

- Toistamalla opettajan perässä / Repeating after the teacher
- Lukemalla ääneen / Reading aloud
- Opettelemalla foneettisia merkkejä / Learning the phonetic alphabet
- Tekemällä suullisia pari- tai ryhmätöitä / Doing oral pair or group work
- Katsomalla englanninkielisiä videoita / Watching English speaking videos
- Pitämällä suullisia esityksiä / Giving oral presentations
- Muu mikä? / Other, which? \_\_\_\_\_



**16. Käyttäen seuraavaa arvoasteikkoa, arvioi miten tyytyväinen olet entisen lukiosi ääntämisen opetustapoihin / Using the following scale please rate how satisfied you are with the teaching methods of pronunciation in your former upper secondary school?**

			3. Ei tyytyväinen eikä		
		2.	tyytymätön/ Not satisfied nor	4.	
	1. Erittäin tyytymätön/ Strongly dissatisfied	Jokseenkin tyytymätön/ Somewhat dissatisfied		Jokseenkin tyytyväinen/ Somewhat satisfied	5. Erittäin tyytyväinen/ Strongly satisfied
Olen... / I am...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**17. Perustele vastauksesi / Please give reasons for your answer**

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**18. Käyttäen seuraavaa arvoasteikkoa, arvioi kuinka tyytyväinen olet lukioaikaisten opettajiesi ääntämiseen? / Using the following scale please rate how satisfied you are on your upper secondary school teachers' pronunciation?**

				Ei tyytyväinen eikä	
			tyytymätön/ Not satisfied or	Jokseenkin tyytyväinen/ Somewhat satisfied	
	Erittäin tyytymätön/ Strongly dissatisfied	Jokseenkin tyytymätön/ Somewhat dissatisfied		Jokseenkin tyytyväinen/ Somewhat satisfied	Täysin tyytyväinen/ Strongly satisfied
Olen... / I am...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**19. Perustele vastauksesi / Please give reasons for your answer**

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**20. Käyttäen seuraavaa arvoasteikkoa, arvioi lukiossa saamaasi ääntämisen opetusta / Using the following scale please rate the teaching of pronunciation in your upper secondary school**

			3. Ei hyvää		
		2.	eikä	4.	
	1. Erittäin huonoa/Very poor	Jokseenkin huonoa/ Fairly poor	huonoa/ Not good nor poor	Jokseenkin hyvää/ Fairly good	5. Erittäin hyvää/ Excellent
Opetus oli.../ Teaching was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**21. Perustele vastauksesi / Please give reasons for your answers**

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**22. Oliko lukiossasi tarjolla valinnainen ääntämiskurssi? / Did your former upper secondary school offer an optional pronunciation course?**

- Kyllä / Yes
- Ei / No

**23. Suorititko valinnaisen ääntämiskurssin? / Did you take the optional pronunciation course?**

- Kyllä / Yes
- Ei / No

**24. Koetko valinnaisen kurssin olleen hyödyllinen? / Do you feel that the optional course was useful?**

- Kyllä / Yes
- En / No
- En suorittanut kurssia / I didn't take the course

**25. Miksi koet kurssin olleen hyödyllinen/hyödytön? / Why do feel that the course was useful/useless?**

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**26. Koetko oppineesi ääntämistä enemmän koulussa vai koulun ulkopuolella? / Have you learned pronunciation more in school or outside of school?**

- Koulussa / at school
- Koulun ulkopuolella / Outside of school
- En tiedä / I don't know

**27. Mikäli haluat antaa palautetta kyselystä tai lisätä jotain aiempiin vastauksiisi liittyen, voit tehdä sen tässä / If you wish to give feedback on the questionnaire or add something to your previous answers, you can do it here.**

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500 merkkiä jäljellä