

Teaching English pronunciation by non-native teachers as seen by Slovak teachers

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Abstract

The English language has become the so called “world wide language” due to the fact that it is used globally in many spheres of everyday life - education, business, labour market, technology, tourism, travel and others. In Slovakia, the educational system supports schools in the acquisition of the language by granting more English classes per week, by financing textbook materials, by bridging teaching practice with research as well as making English a mandatory subject of school leaving exams.

One of the crucial components in the English language education of Slovak learners appears to be the pronunciation. This language feature has its specificities and therefore it must be approached carefully. Although many researchers in Slovakia have focused on various aspects of English pronunciation, this article aims at the English teachers and their perception of this important issue. The survey focuses on Slovak teachers’ opinions about teaching English pronunciation to non-native learners, more specifically, about teaching techniques, error corrections, textbook materials and university teacher training.

Key words: Acquisition, English Pronunciation, Slovak Learners, Slovak Teachers of English, Teaching, Textbooks, Teacher Preparation

Introduction

Learning to speak foreign languages is in general a complex process that covers many specific areas that must be mastered. Being a non-native speaker of any foreign language requires undertaking a long journey of acquisition. This acquisition process is easier if the learner is surrounded by speakers of the target language and thus is immersed – forced to use the language immediately without hesitation. Looking at the Slovak learners whose aim is to be a fluent speaker of English, we realize that the position of teachers of English is crucial. The teacher’s role in the educational environment is indispensable. Furthermore, the teacher is the one who shows learners how to do things and so guides them to language output. The teacher’s engagement in the learning process at school is no doubt very crucial, since he/she to a large extent affects the learner’s production of the language. As Pokrivčáková (2012, p. 33) states: “Each foreign language teacher has

a unique teaching style. It is relatively stable way of teacher's professional performance when he/she prefers particular types of social interaction, specific combinations of teaching techniques and activities. An individual teacher's teaching style is determined by his/her professional training, personal views, opinions and beliefs... Teacher's beliefs about learning/learners and teaching/teachers affect everything that they do in the classroom and they have greater influence on their classroom actions than a particular methodology or a course book they follow."

It is widely accepted that pronunciation plays a key role in intelligibility between the non-native and the native speaker of English. Many learners at schools in Slovakia have a hard time to cope with such an important aspect of English language as pronunciation. The evidence for troubles with pronunciation is proven by many pronunciation errors that have been spotted within the surveys conducted by Kráľová (2011) and Bodorík, Kehoe (2013). It is logical that these pronunciation errors discovered among learners at grammar schools and university levels have a root somewhere in the earlier stages of education. This is the reason why in this article I have decided to focus on elementary schools, with emphasis on teachers who work at this level of education.

Non-native teachers and teaching English pronunciation

Within the last decade several authors such as Conti (2009), Tennant (2007), Vernon (2009) have frequently stated that the pronunciation area of English as second language learning and teaching is often suppressed. Tennant (2007) reveals in his article: "Pronunciation is one area of teaching which is often neglected. This is evident in the way that pronunciation is treated in most coursebooks." He also says: "I also notice that when I talk to teachers, there are a few who say they try and do some pronunciation in most lessons, but the majority either do very little or none at all!" With this opinion in mind I decided to use the research item above to reveal if respondents approach pronunciation on a regular basis. The current educational situation requires Slovak teachers who work with elementary school learners of English to cover a wide area of duties, responsibilities, demands and, alongside that, to continually develop their own professional skills. However, the scope of this paper forces one to narrow down one's attention just to specific areas that link the teacher to the teaching of English pronunciation, most importantly the pronunciation errors which are the evidence that learners face certain obstacles in the process of appropriate acquisition. Inappropriate speech can cause the speaker to be misunderstood by the listener, indicating unintelligible message transfer. These errors may vary because the Slovak and English languages have two different sound systems and the features in segmental and suprasegmental phonology have different historical

development, which means that they are not always compatible. For these reasons the attention is focused on finding out what Slovak teachers see as the pronunciation errors and whether they correspond to the findings of former surveys.

The second aspect is the textbook materials which also play an important role. In teaching, the teacher uses specific tasks to enhance pronunciation acquisition. It is therefore relevant to survey what types of tasks are used most often for learners and what options are available for teachers here.

The third aspect of this research is oriented towards teacher. As previously said teacher is the one who designs the lesson and selects the aspects of learning. Therefore, it is also valuable to see what areas of pronunciation teachers select to exercise and how they plan lesson time. Moreover, Tennant adds: "Pronunciation is not just about producing the right sounds or stressing the right syllables, it is also about helping learners understand what they hear" (2007, p. 4) Here becomes relevant the knowledge of how Slovak teachers are prepared during their university studies for their teaching mission and what they do to keep their spoken language fresh.

For all of the reasons stated above, I have decided to look also at how Slovak teachers perceive the teaching of English pronunciation at the elementary school level.

The teaching of English pronunciation in Slovakia has not been given much critical attention so far. It has mostly focused on:

- a) comparative analyses of Slovak and English pronunciations and a concept of a foreign accent (Bilá, 1999, 2001, 2005; Bilá & Džambová, 2010; Kráľová 2002, 2010, 2011);
- b) specific aspects of teaching English pronunciation to non-native learners (Beňuš, 2010; Bilá, 1997; Bilá & Eddy, 2012; Bohušová & Katreniaková, 2002; Eddy, 2013, 2015; Gondová, 2012; Kehoe, 2015; Kráľová, 2009a, 2009b; Kráľová & Metruk, 2012; Pokrivčáková, 2014; Straková & Cimermanová, 2005).

Research objective and questions

The main objective of this research is:

- to find out what the attitudes of Slovak teachers are toward English pronunciation teaching and errors that learners produce;
- to reveal what materials Slovak teachers use for practising English pronunciation;

- to learn how Slovak teachers as non-native speakers of English assess their previous university teacher training in regard to teaching pronunciation.

Research questions

- 1) What are the most common pronunciation errors made by Slovak learners of the English language viewed from teachers' perspective and how are they approached?
- 2) What are Slovak teachers' attitudes regarding the teaching of English pronunciation?
- 3) What are the most frequently used textbooks, materials and types of activities that Slovak teachers use for teaching of English pronunciation?
- 4) Are Slovak teachers of English sufficiently prepared for teaching English pronunciation?

Methodology

To gain and analyse teachers' opinions, experience, and attitudes, the semi-structured questionnaire was opted for as an appropriate research method (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2007; Gavora, 2010). The questionnaire was piloted in the group of 10 experienced teachers (teaching practice more than 10 years) and after necessary modifications it was administered in an on-line form via www.survio.sk application while respecting basic criteria stated by Cohen, Manion, Morrison (2007, p. 318) as follows: "informed consent, the right to withdraw or not to complete the questionnaire, the potential of the research to improve their situation, guarantee of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability".

The questionnaire was designed to discover how teachers see the real status of English pronunciation in their classes. For that reason individual questions were linked to the following areas: a) the first items asked general information of the English teachers, b) questions that were supposed to investigate the way a teacher teaches pronunciation in English classes, her/his teaching practise with individual phonological aspects, opinions on learners' errors, c) items that surveyed the most frequented materials and tasks used for this purpose – these questions were connected to textbooks, d) the last field of interest was the teacher's background mainly, her/his university studies and preparation for real teaching practice, how they keep up their own English language skills.

Respondents

The respondent group consisted of 90 non-native teachers of English who were at the time of the survey practising teaching English at elementary schools (grades 3 – 9). One of them taught at the elementary special school for disabled learners.

Their teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 36 years (Table 1) with the average length of teaching practice of 13.74 years. The respondent group consisted of 76 and 14 male teachers. As for the length of their teaching experience, the group included both novice teachers with their teaching practice of three years or less (17 teachers), as well as very experienced teachers who have been teaching English for more than 30 years (6 teachers).

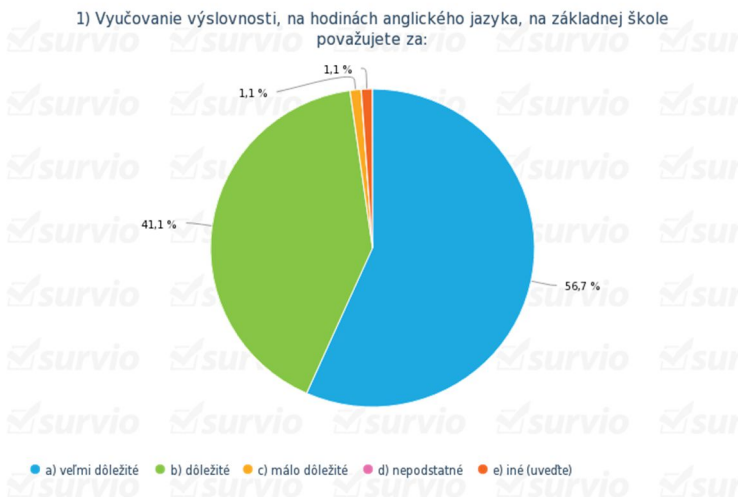
Tab. 1: Respondents – length of their teaching practice

Years of teaching practice	Number of respondents	Average
0 – 3	17	13.74
4 – 10	27	
11 – 20	22	
21 – 30	18	
31 and more	6	
Total	90	

Research results

As shown in the Graph 1 (downloaded from www.surveymonkey.com application, therefore in Slovak), nearly all respondents considered the teaching of pronunciation in English language classes at elementary school very important or important (97.8%). Only one respondent considered pronunciation in English classes as of little importance. In addition, one respondent opted for the answer “other” and added: “It is important when it threatens the intelligibility of speech, but it is possible to communicate even with pronunciation errors”.

Graph 1:
Importance of
Pronunciation
Teaching



Graph 2:
Teaching time
used for
developing
pronunciation



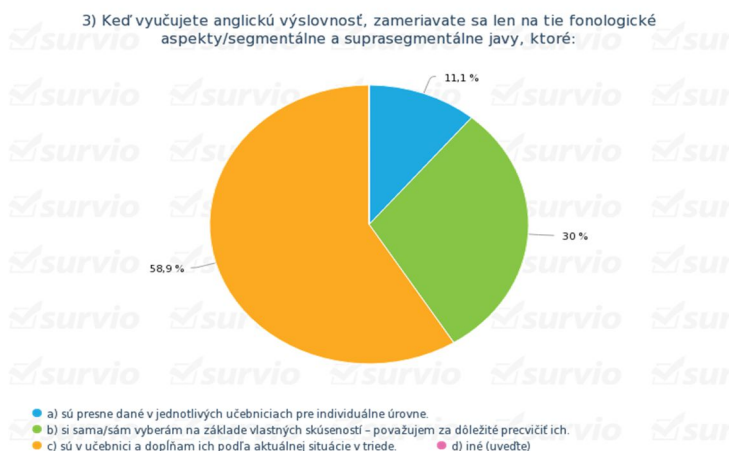
Approximately 79 % of the respondents, precisely 71 of them, stated that they work with English pronunciation in a regular manner during every single language class when their learners meet some aspect concerning this area. 11% of teachers answered that they would stick to the pronunciation explanation and practice solely when it occurs in the textbook. 8% of teachers answered that they would deal with phonological aspects only when learners had serious problems with

pronunciation. The last option was chosen by 2 teachers who closely specified their answers as follows:

- a) *"By the introduction of new vocabulary and by the exercises on the stress, accent".*
 b) *"It depends on the class where I teach, for the second-year learners always with new vocabulary, otherwise by individual problems".*

According to the gained results, when teaching English pronunciation, majority of teachers (app. 59 %) focus on those phonological aspects/segmental and suprasegmental phenomena that are included in the textbooks and add their own teaching activities. 27 respondents claimed they pay attention to the phonological aspects on their own assumption and to what they believed was best for their learners. 11.1 % of teachers use only materials included in the textbooks.

Graph 3:
Selecting
teaching
materials for
developing
pronunciation



When asked about the types of teaching activities they use for teaching English pronunciation, teachers were asked to name specifically 3 teaching activities they use most often. The results are given in table 2 and they point to the reliance of Slovak teachers on controlled activities with a very low level of creativity and communicativeness.

Tab. 2 Frequency of tasks used for teaching English pronunciation

Task Type	Frequency
Listen and repeat	83 x
Match words with appropriate sounds	60 x
Circle the silent letters	40 x
Mark the stress in words	31 x
Odd one out	3 x
Match the homophones	2 x
Listening to songs with lyrics	2 x
Can you hear?, Chants, Choose the correct sound, Circle the word you hear, Complete, Do they end in?, Drills, Find the word with different sound, Homonyms, How do you pronounce it?, Listen and circle, Listen and match, Listen and read, Listen and say, Mark the intonation, Read, Read in brackets (vocabulary book), Repeat, Recordings and situation videos	1x

When asked if and how they correct *the pronunciation errors of their learners*, 46.7 % of teachers claimed they correct learners' pronunciation errors whenever they hear them. 34 teachers (37.58%) answered that they correct mispronounced utterances when the mistake is repeated several times. The option when the teacher rectifies the pronunciation error only if it affects the understanding of the speech was chosen by 9 respondents. 5 respondents added their own answers:

- 1) *"I correct always but I try not to jump into learner's speech. I wait until the end when he/she finishes speaking for the sake of his/her better self-confidence."*
- 2) *"Always when I hear an error I point it out but do not get involved right away into the speaking or reading."*
- 3) *"It depends on the situation when the error appears – whether the activity is focused on fluency or accuracy."*
- 4) *"When it threatens the intelligibility and when it is repeated often."*
- 5) *"Depending on the purpose of the lesson."*

In item 8, respondents were asked to specify 5 most frequented pronunciation errors that they could register among their learners. Not all respondents mentioned 5 examples of errors, therefore the total is lesser than the expected 450. Table 3 shows teachers' responses given in a descending order.

Graph 4:
Pronunciation
error correction



Tab. 3 Types of pronunciation errors

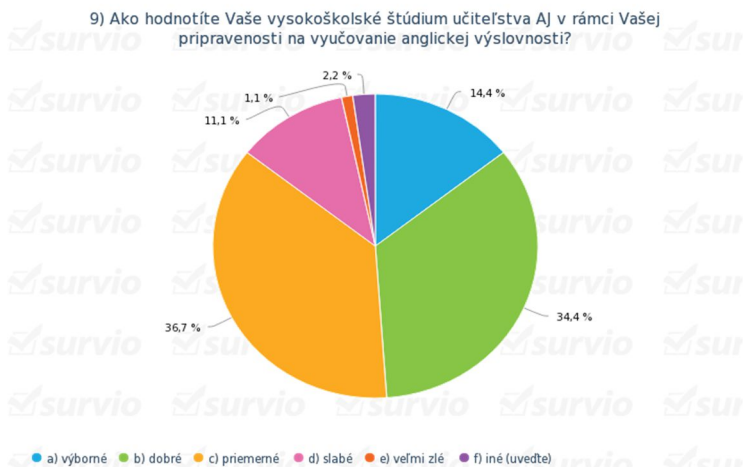
Type of a pronunciation error	Occurrence
Incorrect Placement of Stress	51 x
Substitution of Phoneme /ð/ for /d/, /tʃ/	44 x
Pronunciation of Silent Letters	43 x
Substitution of Phoneme /θ/ for /f/, /t/	42 x
Problems in Differentiation between /v/ and /w/	41 x
Shortening of Vowel Sounds	26 x
Incorrect Pronunciation of Definite Article	9 x
Incorrect Pronunciation of Phoneme /ŋ/ Possibly Suffix -ing	6 x
Pronouncing as the Word is Written	
Inappropriate Pronunciation of Consonant Sound /r/	5 x
Problems in Differentiation between /e/ and /æ/	4 x
Inappropriate Intonation of Various Sentences	3 x
Pronunciation of Slovak letter 'ch' - /x/	
Complete Mispronunciation of a Word	2 x
Problems with Pronunciation of Schwa /ə/	

The other aspects that were mentioned by the respondents once were: learners do not pronounce plural forms of words; problems with past forms of verbs /ɪd/, /d/, /t/; problems with pronunciation of diphthongs and triphthongs; letter (phoneme) "t" being pronounced as its soft version /tʃ/; substitutions of phonemes:

/k/ - /s/, /s/ - /z/, /t/ - /f/. Several teachers replied to the questions with explanations or by giving examples of problematic issues concerning errors in pronunciation that trouble Slovak learners. These were as follows: "Learners cannot pronounce a word. They often express it the way that it is written. The next incorrect feature is the rough way of pronunciation or the so-called Lidl English"; "the exchange in pronunciation of science, since which pupils pronounce identically, the word put is said as /pʌt/"; "atypical consonant other than in Slovak"; "problem with a vowel and between consonants (ladder, later)"; "variation of a phoneme"; "pronunciation of 'double' ee"; "wrong pronunciation of individual sounds a, i, o, u"; "assimilation at the end of a word"; "Some students just simply have a feeling for the language and perfectly reproduce English words, phrases, sentences. Some children are struggling with it for years. Perhaps it would be of help if the texts that are in the books would be available for pupils as well as teachers on CD and in particular the increasing pupils' interest into learning would suit too."; "Very often words are pronounced as they are written and as one of the reasons I see learning of vocabulary for written tests and a lack of work with phonetic alphabet for which there is no time left and it cannot be assumed that pupils of elementary schools work independently with it at home"; "problem with English alphabet"; they cannot correctly pronounce sounds that we do not have in Slovak".

In item 9, the respondents were asked to evaluate how their university studies had prepared them for teaching English pronunciation. The results are shown in graph 7.

Graph 5:
Usefulness of
university
studies



Only 13 teachers (14.4 %) associated their courses with *excellence*, believing that they were adequately prepared for their future profession. 33 teachers considered their university training as *average*. 31 teachers (34.4 %) thought that during their graduate studies they had been trained at a *good* level and so subsequently they felt prepared for teaching practice. 10 teachers (11.1 %) regarded their preparation at university for teaching English pronunciation as *poor*. One respondent even assigned his/her training for teaching profession as *very poor*. Two teachers expressed their attitudes more specifically:

- 1) *"I did not graduate from teaching but I passed a state exam from English language, I hold a university degree and I went through additional studies."*
- 2) *"My studies were excellent but I think more courses and subjects should be provided with native English speakers."*

The last item of the questionnaire focuses on the ways how teachers – as main models of correct pronunciation for their learners – *maintain or possibly improve their own English pronunciation*? Their answers are summarized in Table 4.

Tab. 4: Maintaining teachers' level of correct pronunciation

Sources for English Pronunciation	Occurrence
Watching TV	78 x
Communication with Native Speakers	39 x
Seminars and Conferences	33 x
A Stay Abroad	29 x
Listening to Songs	24 x
Reading Books	6 x
Work with a Dictionary	3 x

The above data demonstrate that the majority of respondents rely on listening to authentic materials (watching TV: watching various documentaries, movies, news, series, sitcoms, talk shows, etc.). A few of the respondents even use these daily. The second frequented form of updating English spoken output is communication, typically with native English speakers as well as talking to a friend or lecturer, or cooperation with other teachers from different countries (e-twinning), or other people not necessarily exclusively native English speakers but those who use English as a means of communication. Teachers also considered participation at conferences or seminars as valuable for their speaking abilities, so they added courses with native speakers and webinars to their answers. The fourth example the respondents mentioned was a stay abroad or the option to live in English-speaking countries. Some of them studied abroad (Erasmus

Programme) or they worked and lived in an English-speaking area. Listening to various things was seen as a suitable way to develop spoken utterance. The teachers mentioned listening to recordings, songs, spoken texts in English, or singing songs and working with lyrics (YouTube). Also, to refresh language teachers read English texts, books, newspapers, web pages as well as worked with dictionaries. In one instance a respondent worked with the www.forvo.com - an online pronunciation dictionary. Other options mentioned only once were not included into the table above. Those were: self-studying, translation and playing online games with voice chat. No one mentioned any accredited or institutionally organised course with a possibility to get a certificate.

Conclusion

What follows are the answers to individual research questions regarding the previously stated survey findings.

First, Slovak teachers see that the problem of English pronunciation among Slovak learners is linked to both segmental and suprasegmental phonology. The most troublesome area is the incorrect placement of stress. Learners have the tendency to follow the stress pattern in their mother tongue and therefore when applying it the whole appropriate pronunciation effect is corrupted. According to the research results, the most audible issues of segmental phonology are the substitution of phoneme /ð/ for /d/, /tʃ/ and substitution of phoneme /θ/ for /f/, /t/ as well as pronunciation of silent letters. Slovaks also have trouble to properly differentiate between /v/ and /w/ sounds. In the matter of these features it is necessary to point out that Slovak sound inventory does not contain phonemes /ð/ and /θ/. In terms of phoneme /w/ Slovak language may have a sound similar to the English version.

The results found in this survey of teachers correspond with those researched by Kráľová (2011) who came to similar conclusion in her analysis of pronunciation errors among university students.

In addition, the survey showed that Slovak teachers mostly follow the overall principles of effective teaching pronunciation (Kráľová & Metruk, 2012; Pokrivčáková, 2012; Straková & Cimermanová, 2005). Almost a half of the surveyed teachers correct the learner's mispronunciation immediately after it is registered. The next quite high number of respondents were those who correct the pronunciation error when it is repeated several times.

Second, Slovak teachers consider teaching English pronunciation an important feature of language acquisition. Majority of them claimed that they worked with learners on English pronunciation regularly in almost every class and they did not depend only on students' book pronunciation offer. Furthermore, when selecting materials to practice pronunciation with learners, majority of them combine

activities from student's books and materials of their own selection based on the needs of learners.

Third, to teach English pronunciation, Slovak teachers use quite a limited range of teaching activities. Furthermore, they tend to prefer activities based on mechanical modelling (repeating sound models) with low level of creativity and communicative openness. This can be seen as a space for designers of teacher training courses. This implication may be supported by the research results because majority of the respondents were not fully satisfied with the level of preparation they achieved during their university study. More than a third of the asked teachers claimed their university preparation for teaching English pronunciation to be average. Another 11 % of respondents marked their education as poor.

Finally, supplementary information from the questionnaire showed that teachers continue to maintain their pronunciation by exposure to various sources, such as: watching TV, communication with native speakers of English, seminars and conferences.

As for further inquiry it would be important to discover to what extent the already used textbooks and their pronunciation tasks are suitable for Slovak learners' needs. Is the *Project* set the only source for pronunciation teaching or do Slovak learners have other suitable textbooks at their disposal for their English pronunciation improvement?

It is clear from the findings that there are 4 major task types and there are not many other offers, varieties of tasks suitable for learners' needs. Are these traditional ways of pronunciation practice useful and appealing for learners? Searching answers to this question should become one of the priorities for the future survey.

The questionnaire survey makes it evident that Slovaks have specific needs in terms of pronunciation errors. These types of pronunciation errors have also been spotted by Slovak researchers as mentioned previously. Regarding this it would be useful to find out how teachers help learners to overcome their difficulties and what universities provide for future teachers in order to help with this complex phenomenon.

Another aspect is the way to approach pronunciation errors. The immediate correction of mispronounced word/sentence affects learner's confidence and creates fear of speaking. Another crucial point when dealing with these errors is the teacher's pronunciation. How do Slovak teachers keep up their accuracy and intonation and what options do they have to improve if their speech is not sufficient for learners?

It is necessary to carry on with the research into these issues in the future and investigate this broad area of teaching English pronunciation. Knowledge in the field would assist teachers, and so help Slovak learners as well.

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Appendix 1: The questionnaire (online at www.survio.sk)

Dear colleague,

Thank you for your interest to participate in this questionnaire survey as your opinions and experiences are extremely important to us. The questionnaire is part of an empirical research study. It is designed for those English teachers who work in primary schools (5th to 9th grade) and teach this subject. Its content focuses on the teacher's view on the teaching of English pronunciation.

The questionnaire is anonymous and your honest answers will be used only for scientific purposes and consequently to improve the learning environment at elementary schools as well as for the development of university studies for future teachers of English. Filling out the questionnaire will take no more than 10 minutes. For your willingness, time and true responses thank you in advance

Type of school you teach at: (options: Fill in the information)

The number of years of your teaching practice: (Options: Fill in the information)

Sex: (Options: Fill in the information)

Teaching pronunciation in English language classes at elementary school is considered by you as:

Options:

- a) Very important*
- b) Important*
- c) Of little importance*
- d) Insubstantial*
- e) Other (please specify)*

How much time do you spend in a week teaching pronunciation?

Options:

- a) At each lesson we discuss something concerning pronunciation. It depends on what aspect we come across.*
- b) I pay attention to pronunciation only when it is given as a task in the textbook.*
- c) I teach pronunciation only when learners have a serious problem with it.*
- d) Other (please specify)*

When you teach English pronunciation do you focus only on those phonological aspects / segmental and suprasegmental phenomena that:

Options:

- a) *are precisely given/stated in the individual textbooks for single levels*
- b) *I choose myself based on my own experience – those I consider important to practice*
- c) *are in the textbook and I complete them according to the current situation in the classroom*
- d) *other (please specify)*

When teaching English pronunciation in the classes do you use:

Options:

- a) *the school textbook with activities and exercises in it*
- b) *other materials than those in the school textbook (my own activities and exercises)*
- c) *activities from the textbook as well as my own*
- d) *I do not use textbook or my own materials*
- e) *Other (please specify)*

Please can you specify what 3 types of tasks for the teaching of English pronunciation you use most often? (For example: Mark the Stress in Words, Listen and Repeat, Match Words with Sounds)

Please specify what set of textbooks you use:

Do you correct pronunciation errors of your learners?

Options:

- a) *Yes, whenever I hear the error.*
- b) *Yes, if the error is often repeated.*
- c) *Yes, only if the error threatens the intelligibility of speech.*
- d) *No, I do not pay attention to the pronunciation errors of my learners.*
- e) *Other (please specify)*

Please specify the 5 most frequented pronunciation errors that you register among your learners: (For example: substitution of phoneme /ð/ for /d/ or /θ/ for /t/, /f/; incorrect placement of stress, shortening of vowel, pronunciation of silent letters, pupils do not know the difference between /v/ a /w/...)

How do you evaluate your university studies of English language in terms of your preparation for teaching English pronunciation?

Options:

- a) *Excellent*
- b) *Good*
- c) *Average*
- d) *Poor*
- e) *Very poor*
- f) *Other (please specify)*

During university studies, did you have subjects that dealt with comparison of sound systems between Slovak and English language or possibly the difference between them and those that dealt with the problems of English pronunciation by Slovak pupils?

Options:

- a) *No*
- b) *Yes. Please specify those you remember.*

Please can you specify how you work on maintaining or possibly improving your English pronunciation? (*Examples: communication with a native English speaker, a stay abroad, watching English movies / TV channels, participation at a conference/educational seminars.*)