

# Pronunciation in an EFL setting: What's going on inside & around European classrooms?

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*Over the past 30 years, numerous studies have looked at how English pronunciation is taught around the world, examining teaching practices, materials, training and attitudes to native speaker models from both the teachers' and the learners' perspective. Although these studies have examined important aspects of pronunciation teaching, the majority were restricted to English-speaking countries. Consequently, a group of us working in Europe felt it would be useful to compare how pronunciation is taught in Europe. Starting in 2009 we collectively designed an online survey called the English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey (EPTiES), which we used over a period of two years to compile data about teaching practices (Henderson et al., 2012). This paper provides a brief overview of our results for seven countries about three interrelated aspects: the training teachers received to teach English pronunciation, what they say happens inside and outside the classroom. Further results and more detailed analyses can be found in the authors' various publications.*

## **Survey and participants**

The EPTiES includes 57 multiple-choice, Likert-scale, open-ended questions, grouped into nine categories. We obtained responses from 843 teachers in 31 European countries; however, the present paper is based on the 640 respondents from the countries where at least 20 teachers completed the survey, that is, Finland (FI, n=103), France (FR, n=65), Germany (DE, n=362), Macedonia (MK, n=36), Poland (PL, n=20), Spain (ES, n=20) and Switzerland (CH, n=23).

Most participants were female non-native speakers of English and worked in the public sector. The age groups they taught were: primarily adults in Switzerland; mainly adults and a smaller percentage of young adults in France and Spain; mostly young adults and, to a lesser degree, children in Finland, Germany and Macedonia; people from across the entire age spectrum in Poland.

## Results and analyses

### Training received to teach English pronunciation

Apart from some participants in Switzerland and Finland, none of the respondents have specific EFL/ESL qualifications. Thirteen respondents from Switzerland described themselves as TEFL-trained (e.g., DipTEFL, CELTA, MEd in TESOL) and 94% of respondents from Finland had at least an MA degree (Finnish EFL teachers are expected to hold an MA degree in English with a minor in pedagogy). The Polish respondents are either recent graduates or are still doing MA courses. All the Macedonian respondents have BA degrees, one has an MA degree, and one has a CPE certificate. In the case of Spain, all respondents except one have undergraduate degrees, and a further 25% also have an MA or PhD. More than half the respondents in France and 97% in Germany have passed national competitive exams for recruiting teachers, and many other different levels and types of qualifications were listed.

Participants described their training by referring to either general phonetics or pronunciation courses, or to pronunciation modules in CELTA-type courses or MA programmes. Many also mentioned having had little or no training. Nevertheless, they tended to rate their training positively, as in, for example:

- I didn't get much training but I had an excellent phonetics teacher.
- [Courses were] theoretically based without any practical classroom application but a good overview of the IPA and the different terms related to the mouth along with the restrictions some speakers may have.

Many of the respondents (only 10% of whom were native speakers) simply described how they had practiced their own pronunciation or mentioned undergraduate courses: 'a few classes about the pronunciation of English, intonation etc., but just the theory and no actual demonstration of how to teach them.' As another wisely remarked: 'knowing about something is certainly not the same as knowing how to teach it.' Knowing how to speak fluently is still perceived as sufficient to teach pronunciation:

- I went to study abroad, one year in Australia. Best pronunciation training ever.
- None at all, but I lived in GB for a year.

On the other hand, one participant likened pronunciation teaching to 'wandering around in the dark' and another admitted to shying away from it for her entire career. Yet another spoke of 'a vicious circle' in which she does not feel she truly understands phonetics and

phonology, but she has never tried to learn more about them because she does not feel any obligation to teach pronunciation.

## Inside the classroom

### Materials

The EPTiES asked teachers about their use of published and on-line materials, and their access to language laboratories and/or via portable sound players. Their replies indicated that textbook and dictionary use is much lower in France (49% and 69% of respondents, respectively) than in the other six countries (means of 97% and 90%, respectively), whereas CDs and DVDs are widely used in all seven countries. The most popular on-line resources are specific language learning websites (76%), such as *Voice Of America* and *BBC Learning English*, followed by websites not specifically intended for this purpose, such as *YouTube* (64%). Substantial minorities of respondents said they use pre-existing modules (45%) and podcasts (37%).

Access to multimedia and/or digital language labs varies from 7% in Germany to 100% in Switzerland. Portable sound players are also widely available and frequently offset limited use of a separate lab. It is a positive sign that over half the respondents said they had sufficient access to technical support.

### Teaching methods

Almost 80% of respondents claimed to devote up to a quarter of their weekly teaching time to teaching pronunciation. According to just over half the respondents, a quarter of weekly class time is sufficient, whereas a third would like to devote up to half their class time to it. Communication is often considered a higher priority than pronunciation work: 'I believe Polish students don't have problems with pronunciation, they are easily understood.' and 'My students are more interested in communication than pronunciation.' Several Macedonian participants stressed the importance of communication, considering that English 'needs to be learnt' because it is 'the language of global trade' and 'all information is in English'.

Even when pronunciation work is seen as desirable and teachable it may not be perceived as learnable: 'I enjoy teaching pronunciation, the difficult part is that the students find it difficult to grasp.' and 'the phoneme is too abstract and the syllable is more intuitive.'

Three-quarters of respondents use ear training, but use of phonetic symbols is a more contentious issue: 'they will not need to know how to write them. They will only need to be

able to recognise them.' Another participant was certain that 'it helps learners get a feeling for the differences in writing and speaking'. In general, respondents are twice as likely to teach symbol recognition vs. writing, which they see as a way of promoting autonomy among learners, who can become 'independent and with a good dictionary should be able to pronounce any word, known or unknown'. The influence of language-specific features on teachers' decisions was most obvious when participants referred to teaching symbols only for 'difficult' sounds or those absent from learners' native language(s). Age was another factor, as a few participants felt that, for older students, 'it's too late in their studies'. Confidence in their professional skills was another factor, as several teachers admitted they feel uneasy using symbols. Several justified their avoidance of pronunciation work by expressing a conviction that pronunciation cannot be taught without technology and/or that technology in the learners' hands makes teaching pronunciation unnecessary: '(Teaching pronunciation) is very – too – time-consuming. Now they use on-line dictionaries and listen to the pronunciation of words'.

### **Assessment**

Most of the respondents who said they use an established national or international assessment scale referred to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). This is good news because studies have suggested that the CEFR is not widely used in Europe (European Commission 2012, 65). However, only a minority of respondents use an established assessment scale, the highest percentages being in Switzerland (36%), France (31%), Spain (27%) and Finland (23%).

Responses to questions about the practical aspects of assessment showed that the most common choice is during-course assessment (mean 49%), followed by the choice of 'a combination of continuous and end-of-course assessment' (mean 33%). Only one third of respondents said they use diagnostic assessments. Evaluating learners only at the end of a course is quite rare (6% on average, 0% in Macedonia, Spain and Switzerland).

Type of assessment → ↓ Type of Activity	Diagnostic (before)	Formative (during)	Evaluative (at the end)
Oral performances	28%	78%	70%
Reading aloud	28%	73%	56%
Listening comprehension	23%	65%	58%
Oral exams in pairs	15%	46%	53%
Individual oral exams	15%	37%	42%
Written work	9%	18%	18%
Other	5%	11%	7%

Table 1. Percentages of respondents using different tasks to assess pronunciation skills

The most popular assessment activities are oral performances (presentations, sketches, dialogues), closely followed by reading aloud and listening comprehension. Testing learners in pairs is relatively common in both formative assessments and evaluative assessments. Written tasks (e.g., transcription) are used less frequently, even though most of the teachers were trained in transcription. This may be related to the stated communicative objectives of many European curricula. Although no language teaching method is imposed, the European Union seeks to promote 'a broad holistic approach to teaching in which emphasis is placed upon communicative ability and multilingual comprehension. The great majority of educational systems issue recommendations to attach equal emphasis to all four communication skills' (European Commission, 2012, 82). Hence, it would be logical for teachers to prefer assessing learners' pronunciation in situations resembling real-life communication rather than via transcriptions.

## Outside the classroom

### Television and cinema

The European Commission's 2008 paper to the European Parliament, *Multilingualism: an asset and a commitment*, recommended using subtitles to translate films and television programmes. In addition, the European Union has approved several measures promoting

the languages of member states, including the *Télévision sans frontières* (TVSF) directive. This directive obliges member states to ensure that at least 51% of all television programmes, including those broadcast via satellite, Internet, etc., are made in the country. Despite this, the majority of films shown in cinemas are foreign (and mostly American), the average European domestic film market share being only 13% (Finnish Film Foundation 2013: 5).

	FI	FR	DE	MK	PL	ES	CH
YES+SOME replies combined	99%	89%	42%	97%	88%	27%	85%

Table 2. Percentages of respondents who say their learners are exposed to English outside the classroom via subtitled films in the cinema

The very high percentages for Finland, Macedonia and Poland might be due to participants misunderstanding the question as concerning subtitles in English, instead of dubbing; a better question might have been to ask whether films are subtitled or dubbed. In other words, do they provide opportunities to read English and/or to hear it? In all the countries surveyed, foreign films are subtitled in the local language(s) and sometimes in English. In Macedonia, where there is only one national language, foreign films in cinemas are subtitled in Macedonian. An American film shown in Finland as a 'foreign language film' has Finnish and Swedish subtitles but learners hear English. In Germany foreign films may be presented either in their original language, in their original language with German subtitles, or in *their original language with English subtitles*. In Spain, dubbing is more expensive than subtitling but it is culturally and historically established. Switzerland juggles with different languages in both subtitles and dubbing; outside urban centres, films are dubbed in the regional language but in cities, they are shown in their original language with subtitles in two of the official languages.

	FI	FR	DE	MK	PL	ES	CH
YES+SOME replies combined	98%	49%	24%	97%	57%	31%	51%

Table 3. Percentages of respondents who say their learners are exposed to English outside the classroom via subtitled TV programmes

When asked whether learners have access to television programmes subtitled in English, positive answers were given by the vast majority of participants in Finland and Macedonia,

and by roughly half of participants in France, Switzerland and Poland. (The fact that no Finnish TV-programmes are subtitled in English points again to a potential misunderstanding of the question by participants, so these figures must be treated with caution.) Substantially fewer participants in Germany and Spain provided positive answers to this question. Berentzen (2009) noted that in Germany it is rare for films and television programmes to be subtitled. Where subtitles are provided, they are 'primarily intended for the hearing-impaired. In contrast, in Scandinavian countries most television programmes are provided with subtitles in the country's native tongue(s). This greatly helps immigrants learn their new country's language' (ibid.). In Scandinavia, subtitling helps Scandinavians learn each other's languages, thus promoting a degree of regional multilingual awareness.

The idea of using television to improve language learning recently motivated the French national channel *France2* to show an English-language television series every Monday night in English with French subtitles. They have done this despite national language policy, as exemplified by the 1994 Toubon Law which stipulates that 'the French language is a fundamental element of French heritage and national identity' and that it is 'the language of teaching, work, exchanges and public services'. A series of more recent laws reinforces these principles, for example the 2010 law which declares that one of the missions of the French media is 'the defence and illustration of the French language and culture' (law n° 2010-788 , July 12, 2010).

Paradoxically, Switzerland's multilingualism may explain why only half of the participants there indicated that subtitled television programmes provided exposure to English. The Federal Radio and Television Act of 24 March 2006 requires the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation to provide programming to the entire populace in the three official languages and at least one radio programme in Romansh. In regions of language contact, programmes are broadcast in the two languages. Public channels broadcast in the national languages but people may also choose from numerous international channels. In general, the advent of cable and digital TV now often allows viewers throughout Europe to choose between dubbing or subtitles, regardless of national language policy.

The results for availability of media in English partially correlate with results for estimated frequency of exposure. Frequency of exposure via subtitled TV programmes was estimated to be highest in Finland and Macedonia and to be lowest in Germany and Spain. In Poland, the 'voice-over' technique is the most popular means of adapting foreign programmes on television, with one speaker voicing all the characters. However, this is not done in Polish cinemas, which may partly explain why the percentage of participants in Poland who said their learners had access to English via subtitled films in the cinema

was higher even than in Finland. The lowest figures for frequency of exposure to English via subtitled cinema films were for Germany and Spain.

	Exposure to English via ...	FI	FR	DE	MK	PL	ES	CH
FREQUENTLY +SOMETIMES replies combined	Subtitled TV	98%	39%	11%	86%	38%	28%	44%
	Subtitled cinema	91%	52%	7%	61%	94%	17%	68%

Table 4. Percentages of respondents who estimate their learners' exposure to English

To summarise, when comparing these seven countries, learners in Finland and Macedonia have greatest potential access to English via subtitled TV programmes, whereas learners in Finland and Poland have greatest potential access to English via films in the cinema. On the other hand, it would appear that learners in Germany and Spain have to rely on other sources to hear or read English.

#### Face-to-face and online interactions

Participants were asked to estimate how frequently their learners were exposed to English outside the classroom via face-to-face interaction or via on-line resources such as e-mail, forums and chatrooms.

	Exposure to English via ...	FI	FR	DE	MK	PL	ES	CH
FREQUENTLY +SOMETIMES replies combined	Face-to-face interaction	61%	35%	17%	29%	38%	55%	84%
	On-line interaction	88%	69%	48%	82%	69%	59%	68%

Table 5. Percentages of respondents who estimate their learners' exposure to English

Not surprisingly, learners are thought to have more opportunities for communicating in English via on-line media than via face-to-face contacts. The exception is Switzerland, which has four national languages (three official ones) but where English is often used as



a *lingua franca* by Swiss people who want to communicate with people from another language area. We have not found an adequate explanation for the low results in Germany (17%).

The similarity between Finland and Macedonia in terms of frequency of exposure via on-line opportunities (88% and 82%) is interesting. Participants in these two countries also provided similar ratings of the perceived status of English in relation to other languages, giving ratings of 4.65/5 in Finland and 4.69/5 in Macedonia (Henderson et al., 2012). Respondents in Finland frequently mentioned the status of English as a global language, and in Macedonia they mentioned the economic and communicative relevance of English as a world language. However, one Finnish respondent pointed out that 'English is not the only foreign language people should learn', reflecting the fact that Finns value foreign language skills in general. Foreign language skills may be equally valued in Macedonia but the country does not have vast resources to invest in language education.

## Conclusion

EPTiES highlights important features of pronunciation teaching in seven European countries and reveals a number of areas requiring further research. However, it does not allow direct causal relationships to be established between factors.

Although self-taught enthusiasts are important players and are often excellent teachers, most teachers can benefit from professional training. Respondents seemed generally satisfied with the training they had received, even if it did not involve much practice in teaching pronunciation. Unfortunately, old myths persist, notably about how spending time in an English-speaking country equates with pronouncing English well and that knowledge of phonetics and phonology equates with being able to teach pronunciation.

Use of established assessment scales is limited and further research is needed to determine whether assessment is holistic or centred on specific aspects of pronunciation. It is encouraging that the most frequently used assessment tasks are those that focus on communication skills, communication being the main purpose for which European pupils learn English. Nevertheless, one essential feature of communication that is not always treated as such is pronunciation.

Analyses of aspects outside the classroom should encompass national language policy, issues of language status, and regional and national imperatives – both official and de facto. In the years to come, it will definitely be worth keeping an eye on how on-line opportunities are fulfilling a role that other language learning outlets are failing to satisfy.



## Acknowledgements

EPTIES has been a team effort from the start and originally involved Una Cunningham, Deirdre Murphy and Rias van den Doel. We would like to thank all the teachers who responded to the survey.

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