

Beyond «Listen and Repeat»: Investigating English Pronunciation Instruction at the Upper Secondary School Level in Slovakia by R. Metruk: A Book Review

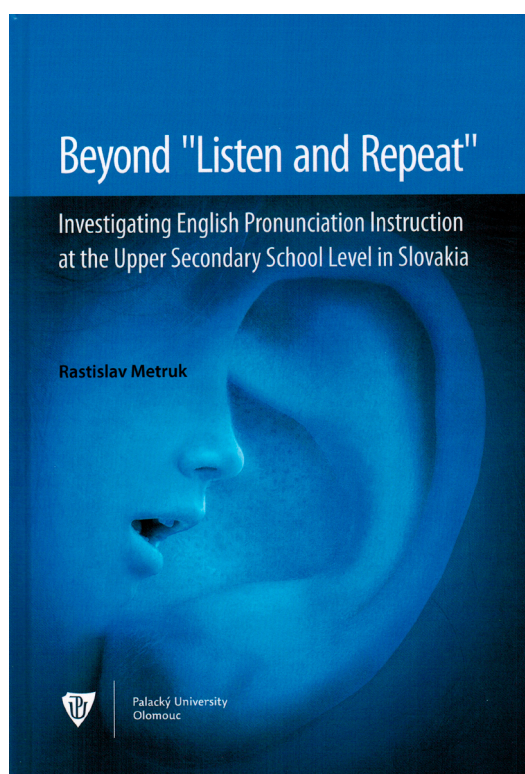
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The author of the monograph, Dr. Rastislav Metruk (a senior lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, University of Žilina, Slovakia), is a prolific academic scholar with extensive experience in teaching, linguistic and didactic research, and publishing activities. His expertise in the field of phonetics and phonology is confirmed by several books and remarkable research articles, for instance ‘Pronunciation of English Dental Fricatives by Slovak University EFL Students’ in the *International Journal of English Linguistics* (Metruk, 2017a), “West” or “Vest”? Pronunciation of English of English Consonants [w] and [v] in the Utterances of Slovak EFL Speakers’ in the *Journal of Language and Education* (Metruk, 2018a), or ‘Comparing Holistic and Analytic Ways of Scoring in the Assessment of Speaking Skills’ (Metruk, 2018b). In his books, *A Concise Introduction to General American Pronunciation: Segmental Features* (Metruk, 2017b) and *A Concise Introduction to General American Pronunciation: Suprasegmental Features* (Metruk, 2019), he deals with segmental and suprasegmental phenomena not only from the phonological point of view, but also from the perspective of effective interlingual communication and EFL (English as a foreign language) didactics.



The purpose of *Beyond «Listen and Repeat»* is to investigate pronunciation teaching practice at the upper-secondary school level in Slovakia from segmental and suprasegmental points of view. Traditionally, fluency and accuracy are acknowledged as two major components of speaking ability in the process of teaching a foreign language (Ekbatani, 2010). While fluency usually refers to the ease and speed of a speech flow, accuracy predominantly concerns the accurate usage of language systems such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Analogically, English pronunciation can be approached from the same standpoints: fluency and

accuracy. While segmental features correspond more closely with accuracy, the prosodic features relate more directly to fluency.

To briefly summarize the contents of the monograph, the opening chapter deals with the current pronunciation teaching practices in Slovakia, i.e. objectives, models, activities, technology affordance, etc. Moreover, the segmental versus suprasegmental debate is introduced. Chapter two analyzes the selected factors that predominantly affect EFL pronunciation, e.g. age, motivation, exposure to the target language, learner's native language interference. The third chapter introduces original research carried out at the Slovak upper-secondary school level. Chapter four defines the methodology of the research and chapters five to seven shed light on research methods and the research results are analyzed. Finally, in the eighth chapter, conclusions are formulated and recommendations provided.

Currently, the teaching of (English) pronunciation is still often neglected by educational institutions and teachers worldwide (Kılıçkaya, 2011; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015). Traditionally, instructors concentrate primarily on grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills without incorporating pronunciation adequately into the teaching and learning process. Some teachers even assume that students can learn correct pronunciation without explicit training and instructions (Gilakjani, 2016).

However, the author of the monograph argues that the EFL teachers should be more aware of the importance of pronunciation and pay more attention to it in their curricula. The primary aim of communication is not only to understand what others say, but also to make yourself understood. In fact, grammar and vocabulary can become useless, if the speaker cannot pronounce the required language elements accurately. On the other hand, if a learner's pronunciation is appropriate or at least acceptable within oral speech, other speakers can understand him/her despite grammatical errors. In other words, correct pronunciation plays a significant role in efficient language production.

In order to develop appropriate pronunciation skills, English teachers are supposed to, first, carry out pronunciation diagnostic analysis and select aspects that can have a great effect on changing the speech of learners towards increased comprehensibility. For this reason, it is important to set both short-term and long-term objectives, and finally, to promote and incorporate new (creative) instructional modes and modules (e.g. pair-work, small-group work, whole-class activity, audio/video recordings, specialized computer software, self-study) (Morley, 1991). In fulfilling the task of achieving the proper phonological control, pronunciation instruction plays a huge role. Through incorporating proper and/or particular pronunciation instruction into the teaching and learning process, students do not only improve their speaking skills but also increase self-confidence (a positive self-image) and develop speech-monitoring and speech-modification strategies (Gilakjani, 2012).

EFL teachers should constantly look for efficient new methods and forms of indicating, practicing, and providing feedback on English pronunciation. The methodologies they adopt are supposed to be appropriate, efficient, and captivating for learners (teachers usually think that pronunciation practice is too monotonous for students). Other works on pronunciation that attempt to draw a broader picture on this complex language system and could be beneficial to EFL educators and researchers include Derwing and Munro (2015), Isbell, Park, and Lee (2019), and Mompean and Fouz-González (2015).

As mentioned above, in the second chapter of the monograph, the author deals with factors influencing the acquisition of proper or acceptable pronunciation: individual phonetic abilities, motivation (positive and negative), and specific personality traits (openness, mental flexibility, curiosity, responsibility, creativity, persistence, etc.). In most cases, the aim of teaching (English) pronunciation is not to sound like native speakers but to reach a state of comfortable intelligibility, i.e. that the speaker's English is easily understandable. However, for some teachers (or learners), their aim is to achieve a native-like accent but this is often an unattainable goal.

As often confirmed by experience, strongly accented speech or an accent that is too different from the norm can become confusing and cause negative judgements on the speaker's personality and competences (Morley, 1994). We must be aware of the fact that appropriate pronunciation is also a significant metacommunicative factor as it not only affects our overall ability to understand a foreign language's speech flow, but it

subconsciously classifies the speaker at several socio-cultural levels (country of origin, education achieved, linguistic or other cognitive abilities), and thus subconsciously determines our response to what a person says.

On the contrary, having appropriate pronunciation may not automatically guarantee the correct use of grammar and vocabulary, although a native-like accent automatically evokes in the listener the notion (and feelings) of an excellent command of language, particularly if the listener is a person who does not demonstrate a sufficient mastery of the language. On the other hand, poor pronunciation skills typically create an impression of linguistic insufficiency and they may cause certain problems on the side of the listener.

Therefore, it is suggested that the learner's accent become as close as possible to the language standards. Teachers ought to raise awareness in learners of both the American and British varieties of English and students should be able to understand them both (Mompean, 2004). Other models have been also proposed, including one for intelligible pronunciation such as Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2000), or even a non-native speaker who is intelligible and comprehensible (Murphy, 2014). It should be also noted that, traditionally, a single model should be chosen; yet it has been emphasized that no single model ought to be forced upon students (Archer, 2018). Concurrently, not only learners, but also teachers – serving as examples to the students – should be accurately trained to improve their pronunciation, which could lead to the subsequent improvement of their pupils' pronunciation.

As far as research methodology is concerned, empirical research in the field of natural sciences usually differs considerably from that of social sciences and humanities in several respects. Its research methods and tools are not only precise, measurable, reliable, but also independent of the person who makes the observations, i.e. they are impartial and objective. A valid scientific method must be «logical, confirmable, repeatable and scrutinizable. Any branch of inquiry that does not allow the scientific method to test its basic laws or theories cannot be called *science*» (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 6).

The current methodologies utilized in social sciences and the humanities include a vast range of approaches, tools, and techniques – both qualitative and quantitative – to make valid observations, interpret results correctly, and generalize them. In any case, they necessarily imply the use of mental abstractions like the unit of analysis, proposition, hypothesis, construct, (independent and dependent) variable, model, paradigm, and so forth.

Moreover, a solid (e.g. functionalist) research methodology must certainly comprise the phases of exploration (research questions, literature review, theory), research design (operationalization, research method, sampling strategy), and research execution (pilot testing, data collection, data analysis) since all scientific research is an iterative process of observation, rationalization, and validation (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 20). To increase the validity of evaluations and research findings, a «triangulation» strategy is often used in social sciences and the humanities that effectively integrates the advantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches so «by combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials, researchers can hope to overcome the weakness of intrinsic biases and the problems that come from single-method, single observer and single-theory studies» (Denzin, 1978, p. 307).

In accordance with the above-mentioned triangulation strategy and functionalistic research methodology, the author of *Beyond «Listen and Repeat»* applied the following exploration tools and methods: a) current textbooks' *content analysis*, b) an inquiry of EFL teachers on related aspects by means of a *questionnaire*, and c) *interviewing* students on their attitudes towards pronunciation teaching practice.

The results of the textbook *analysis* (a) revealed that, predominantly, suprasegmental features are practiced and the drill technique is prevalent during teaching at the Slovak upper-secondary school level.

The data obtained by the *questionnaire* (b) suggest that although teachers regard pronunciation as an important component, a larger amount of pronunciation work should be incorporated in the course textbooks; particularly, suprasegmental categories appear to be more problematic for them to deal with.

The *interview* (c) data analysis revealed that students recognize and realize the importance of pronunciation instruction – both segmentals and suprasegmentals. However, stress, intonation, and rhythm seem to cause

greater problems for the students, mainly because of the fact that the stress patterns of the English language differ fundamentally from Slovak.

It is surprising that several students reported that prosody is often not taught at the upper-secondary school level in Slovakia, which is, without a doubt, an issue that needs to be dealt with. The author further maintains that the importance of both segmental and suprasegmental features in EFL teaching is undeniable and the neglect of either of the two phenomena could result in pronunciation problems of EFL learners as well as lower (overall) speaking ability.

In his final chapter, the author suggests that pronunciation instruction at the upper-secondary levels in Slovakia ought to be given more time. Further, prospective teachers need to undergo a quality pronunciation training, predominantly because the English phonological system is normally considered to be particularly difficult for many EFL learners. Finally, the author calls for further examination in this area by conducting additional content analyses and interviews, and distributing questionnaires to more participants.

To conclude this review, it seems that the author's aims have been successfully fulfilled. The contents of the book appear accurate, clear, relevant, logically organized, and appropriate within and among singular units of study. The research procedure, the interpretation of results, and the final discussion are rigorous, consistent, and pertinent to the topic. The theoretical and practical recommendations provided by the author of the monograph appear exceedingly useful, motivating, and revealing. The need to develop a new textbook (or an original set of textbooks) with more pronunciation activities that would be more suitable for the Slovak learners of English has been confirmed.

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