

Good Servants but Poor Masters: On the Important Role of Textbooks in Teaching English Pronunciation

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Abstract Textbooks are the most commonly used teaching materials among European EFL teachers (Henderson et al., 2012), and it is undeniable that they have a central role in foreign language teaching overall. Scholars across time have claimed that the role of textbooks cannot be overestimated: textbooks determine a major part of classroom teaching (see Sobkowiak, 2012). This paper discusses the influence of textbooks in English pronunciation teaching in an EFL environment. It presents a study in which the occurrence of four typical pronunciation teaching task types and four pronunciation teaching topics were analysed in three data sources: textbooks, classroom observations, and learner interviews. The results indicate that textbooks do have an influence on teaching. This is clearly shown when it comes to task types or pronunciation teaching topics that are absent from the textbooks: they do not occur in the teaching either.

1 Introduction

This paper discusses, and seeks to provoke discussion on the important role of textbooks in ELT, especially in teaching English pronunciation. In the context of the present study, which is Finland, the teaching culture is overall very textbook-oriented: surveys have shown that almost all teachers use textbooks in their teaching (Luukka et al., 2008; Tergujeff, 2013), and that textbooks are considered the most important tool in classroom instruction (Luukka et al., 2008). In Finland, EFL textbooks are all-inclusive material packages that often include much more than just the textbook: in addition, teacher's guides, CDs, CD-ROMs, websites, video material, and ready-made exams are included or available for purchase at an extra price. The textbooks are designed for the Finnish context, and they should follow the themes of the national core curricula.

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The beginning of a teaching career is demanding for the newly-graduated young teacher. In Finland, the amount of teacher training involving actual classroom teaching is relatively small. Hence, teachers usually enter the school world with little experience in teaching and with no routine (unless they have worked part-time or as substitute teachers during their studies). In such a situation, all-inclusive material packages, like the ones used in Finland, come to the rescue. However, the curriculum should set the objectives, and the teachers should determine the ways in which to reach the goals set in the curriculum, and choose appropriate tools. If the teacher blindly follows the textbooks, the textbooks get to set the objectives, possibly turning into “poor masters” instead of “good servants” (Cunningsworth, 1984, p. 1). Newly-graduated teachers are likely to take such steps, just as untrained teachers, who often rely too heavily on textbooks (Derwing & Munro, 2005). In fact, many scholars have written about the important role of textbooks in foreign language instruction (e.g., Sobkowiak, 2012; Chapelle, 2009; Bragger & Rice, 2000). Lent (2012, p. 2) even coined a special term *textbook fatigue*, which she describes as “a hopelessness brought on by robotically following both the sequence outlined by textbook publishers and the activities they provide”. She also refers to fidelity (to the textbook) as the new f-word, and reminds the reader that teachers should be active in planning, implementation, and evaluation of all phases of the curriculum—not obedient followers of packaged textbook series (ibid., p. 3).

When it comes to pronunciation teaching, much depends on the textbooks. According to Derwing et al. (2012), this is due to the fact that many teachers have limited training and confidence in teaching pronunciation. This alarming lack of training that was detected in Canada (Foote et al., 2011) also holds true for Europe: According to the *English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey* (Henderson et al., 2012), many European EFL teachers feel that their training has been insufficient when it comes to teaching pronunciation to pupils. This is true for Finland as well, even though on average the Finnish EFL teachers were more satisfied with their training than teachers in most of the European countries that were involved in the study.

A previous study on English pronunciation teaching in Finland (Tergujeff, 2013) gives reason to suspect that areas of pronunciation which are not dealt with in textbooks are also neglected in teaching. In other words, the textbook is so central that extra materials are not sought, even if this leads to important issues being left out of the programme. Because of this previous finding, the same data were analysed again, with more focus on teaching in relation to textbook content. The study concentrates on lower secondary school teaching, i.e. teaching that concerns pupils in the age of 13–16. The aim of the paper is to point out the potential problems caused by too heavy reliance on textbooks, and to serve as inspiration for future studies on the topic.

2 What Should Be Taught at Lower Secondary Level?

In Finland, English has no official status but is taught in schools as a foreign language. In addition to the national languages, Finnish and Swedish, studying one foreign language is obligatory. Foreign language studies begin at grade three, when learners are at the age of nine. Almost all children study English as their obligatory foreign language (Kumpulainen, 2010, p. 88), which means that when entering lower secondary education (grades 7–9), the pupils have studied English for 4 years.

All teaching in Finland is regulated by national core curricula, which offer general guidelines and learning objectives. In addition, regions, municipalities and individual schools may have their own curricula, but they must be in line with the national core curricula. For lower secondary level, the current relevant national core curriculum is the *National core curriculum for basic education* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004). In regards to foreign languages and language learning, the core curriculum has an overall emphasis on oral skills, with the amount of written practice increasing gradually towards the end of lower secondary level. Even though pronunciation is an important part of oral proficiency, it is hardly mentioned in the core curriculum. There is only one explicit reference to pronunciation, and that has to do with varieties/accents. It reads: “the pupils will learn to be aware of some of the key differences between different variants of English” (2004, p. 141).

Despite the minor coverage of pronunciation in the core curriculum, there are goals set for pronunciation. The core curriculum includes a proficiency scale (as an appendix), which is meant to be used in assessing pupils. The scale is a Finnish version of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) proficiency scale. The core curriculum sets the goal for the end of lower secondary level at proficiency level A2.2. At this level, the criteria include that “pronunciation is intelligible, even if a foreign accent is evident and mispronunciations occur” (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004, p. 284). Hence, pronunciation teaching at lower secondary level should aim at intelligible pronunciation.

How is intelligible pronunciation then achieved? What should be taught? Recent recommendations emphasise the role suprasegmentals; they seem to have more impact on intelligibility than the accurate pronunciation of individual sounds (e.g., Pennington & Richards, 1986; Lane, 2010, p. 9; Morley, 1991; Seidlhofer & Dalton-Puffer, 1995, p. 135; Derwing et al., 1998). For example, incorrect word stress placement is seen as a major cause of communication breakdowns, and therefore a high priority for ESL/EFL learners (Roach, 2000, p. 100; Seidlhofer, 2001; Dirven & Oakeshott-Taylor, 1984, p. 333; Pihko, 1997, p. 126). Teaching segmentals should still not be abandoned, but as put by Seidlhofer & Dalton-Puffer (1995, p. 144), fixation on detail may be counterproductive. Pronunciation teaching should move away from mechanical training through guided practice to tasks that require more spontaneous production of speech (Morley, 1991, p. 510).

Pronunciation and pronunciation teaching are not among the popular research topics within applied linguistics (Deng et al., 2009), even though there has been grown interest towards pronunciation, especially among young researchers (Derwing, 2010). Research on textbooks and their use in teaching is scarce. In a recent paper concerning pronunciation in ESL textbooks used in Canada, Derwing et al. (2012) suggest the following criteria for pronunciation teaching materials in general-skills textbooks: (1) both segmental and suprasegmental features should be addressed, (2) a variety of task types should be used to serve different learning styles, and (3) explicit explanation and rules should be included. The paper reports on a study which revealed that the most frequent pronunciation foci in the analysed textbooks concern suprasegmental features such as intonation, sentence stress, word stress, and rhythm, which suggests that the recent emphasis on suprasegmentals have been adopted to textbooks. This is quite an opposite finding compared to a previous study on English pronunciation teaching in Finland (Tergujeff, 2013), according to which teaching focuses more on the segmental level.

3 Data and Methods

In this study, the focus is on four typical pronunciation teaching task types and four pronunciation teaching topics. The chosen task types are *imitation*, *reading aloud*, *reading phonemic script*, and *writing phonemic script*. Pronunciation teaching topics in focus are *individual sounds*, *word stress*, *sentence stress*, and *intonation*. These particular task types and pronunciation teaching topics were found of interest in a previous study (Tergujeff, 2013). Their occurrence is studied in three different data sets that were gathered for and previously presented in Tergujeff (2013): textbooks, classroom observations and learner interviews. Data collection followed Schmidt's (1990, 1995) noticing hypothesis, according to which language items must be noticed before they can be learnt. Hence, all data had to meet the criteria of explicitly directing the learner's attention to pronunciation, e.g. phonology, articulation, or discrimination. This way, the data consist of explicit pronunciation teaching activities, whereas implicit activities, such as more general oral skills tasks and free production, are excluded in this study. However, I do not deny the potential of such implicit activities. A defined focus was needed for practical reasons.

Data set 1 was collected from two EFL textbook series. Textbooks, separate workbooks and the accompanied teacher's guides were taken into account. In total, six books were analysed. The textbooks were designed for the Finnish context—supposedly following the national core curriculum—and published by two major national textbook publishers. The textbooks represented teaching materials for lower secondary level. The textbooks were commonly in use at the time of data collection, which took place in 2009. A careful analysis of these print materials was carried out to study the occurrence of the task types and teaching topics in the selected textbooks.

The analysis was based on a data-driven classification. Data gathering was carried out in two rounds. In the first round, the following criteria was used to spot potential pronunciation teaching activities: (1) activities that include oral production, (2) materials that include the use of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and (3) other materials that can be considered related to pronunciation and oral production. In the second round, the data gathered in the first round was divided to pronunciation-specific and more general oral skills teaching materials. The pronunciation-specific materials served as the data pool, from which the analysis for the present study was done. The data pool was searched for materials that represent the pronunciation task types and pronunciation teaching topics that this study focuses on. The materials were classified, and their summative occurrences were calculated to determine the commonness of task types and teaching topics in relation to each other.

Data set 2 was gathered by observing the teaching of two EFL teachers, who taught English at the lower secondary level. Data collection took place in 2010. Teacher A taught English in a medium-size Finnish lower secondary school. The age range of her pupils was 13–16. The teacher had 13 years of teaching experience, but only a B.A. degree in English, which means she lacks the formal training of an EFL subject teacher according to the Finnish standards. In Finland, the formal requirement for an EFL subject teacher is an M.A. degree in English, with pedagogical studies and practical teacher training included in the degree as a minor subject. However, terminable and part-time teaching posts are often taken by teachers without formal qualifications, and for that reason, Teacher A was chosen for observation. She was observed for nine 45-min lessons during a 1-week observation period.

Teacher B worked in a small village school. Her teaching groups also consisted of 13–16-year-old pupils. Teacher B's training meets the formal qualifications: she holds an M.A. degree in English and is a qualified EFL subject teacher. She had 10 years of teaching experience. Teacher B was observed for seven 45-min lessons within 1 week. Altogether, 16 lessons were observed, and a written record was kept of the observations. The record was kept with the help of a pre-prepared observation form, which was also utilised in the classification of the task types. The data were further studied to analyse the contents of the teaching. The classification/analysis followed the procedure of the textbook analysis (data set 1). Appropriate permissions were sought and granted from the teachers, school headmasters, and municipality teaching administration.

Data set 3 was obtained by interviewing learners in 2012. A semi-structured thematic interview was used as method. Six learners attending lower secondary education took part. The age of the learners ranged from 15 to 16. The learners were encouraged to freely discuss school teaching in regards to pronunciation. They were asked how pronunciation is taught at school, and what kind of pronunciation activities are included in their textbooks, among other things. The interviews took place in the premises of the participants' school, and they were conducted in the participants' native tongue (Finnish). The interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed for qualitative content analysis. Appropriate permissions were sought and granted from the pupils' guardians, school headmaster, and municipality teaching administration.

4 Results

In the analysed textbooks (data set 1), frequent task types included reading aloud and tasks that required reading IPA. Reading aloud occurred 74 times, and reading IPA 71 times. The tasks that required reading aloud mostly dealt with reading sentences. The tasks are often meant to be done with a partner, i.e. in a pair activity, the pupils taking turns in reading aloud and listening. Still, there is no communicative purpose with the activity. IPA symbols are introduced in a section of their own, and they occur regularly in the textbooks. They are used in introducing new vocabulary, aspects of grammar (pronunciation of past tense ending -ed), and in tasks that aim at developing the pupils' IPA reading skills, such as deciphering tasks. Imitation tasks occurred 35 times. These were mostly used in connection with introducing new vocabulary. Tasks requiring writing of IPA were rare: only three such tasks were found. In these, the pupils' task was to fill in rhyme and include a phonemic transcription. Table 1 below presents the summative numbers of occurrence.

Explicit concentration on the pronunciation teaching topics under study was not popular in the textbooks. The summative numbers of occurrence are presented in Table 2. A few tasks focussing specifically on word stress and individual sounds were discovered, whereas explicit tasks on sentence stress and intonation were non-existent. Word stress was practised through listening to words and marking the correct stress placement. Information was given on the difference between Finnish

Table 1 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching tasks in six Finnish lower secondary level EFL textbooks, workbooks and teacher's guides

| Task | Number of occurrence |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Reading aloud | 74 |
| Imitation | 35 |
| Reading IPA | 71 |
| Writing IPA | 3 |

Table 2 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching topics in six Finnish lower secondary level EFL textbooks, workbooks and teacher's guides

| Topic | Number of occurrence |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Individual sounds | 3 |
| Word stress | 5 |
| <i>Sentence stress</i> | 0 |
| <i>Intonation</i> | 0 |

Non-existent items are italicized

Table 3 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching tasks observed in the 16 lessons by two Finnish EFL teachers

| Topic | Number of occurrence |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Reading aloud | 5 |
| Imitation | 2 |
| Reading IPA | 3 |
| <i>Writing IPA</i> | 0 |

Non-existent items are italicized

Table 4 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching topics observed in the 16 lessons by two Finnish EFL teachers

| Topic | Number of occurrence |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Individual sounds | 3 |
| <i>Word stress</i> | 0 |
| <i>Sentence stress</i> | 0 |
| <i>Intonation</i> | 0 |

Non-existent items are italicized

and English in regards to lexical stress placement. In Finnish, primary stress is generally placed on the word-initial syllable (Suomi et al., 2008, p. 75).

In class (data set 2), only little pronunciation teaching occurred during the 16 lessons that were observed. Three of the lessons had no pronunciation component in them. Of the task types under study, reading aloud occurred five times, tasks that require reading IPA occurred three times, and imitation occurred twice. Reading aloud and imitation was mostly done directly from the textbook, and the tasks dealt with individual words and sentences. Reading IPA was required in connection with learning new vocabulary. Tasks that involve writing IPA were non-existent. Table 3 below shows the summative numbers of occurrence.

The teaching was not focussed on prosody: word stress, sentence stress, and intonation were not addressed at all. Individual sounds were explicitly taught on three occasions, which were somewhat extemporaneous teacher corrections. The initial sounds of the words *honest* and *whole* were paid attention to, and the vowels of *cousin*. The summative numbers of occurrence are presented in Table 4.

In the learner interview data (data set 3), reading IPA and imitation were frequently mentioned task types. See Table 5 for a summary. They were mentioned by six and five learners out of six, respectively. In the interviews, the learners often referred to imitation tasks (provided by the textbook) as common practice in the classroom. IPA seems to be used in teaching as a tool, but the interviews revealed that explicit teaching of the symbols have taken place earlier, at the primary level. According to the pupils, they are expected to know the symbols at lower secondary level, and to be able to read IPA. One of the interviewed pupils found this particularly problematic, because she had not learnt the symbols properly. She stated that she was not interested in language studies at the primary level, and did not concentrate. At the time of the interview, she had become interested in travelling, which had led to better motivation towards language studies. She suffered from the

Table 5 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching tasks in the interviews of six Finnish learners of English

| Topic | Number of occurrence |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Reading aloud | 3 |
| Imitation | 5 |
| Reading IPA | 6 |
| <i>Writing IPA</i> | 0 |

The number represents how many of the six interviewees mentioned the task. Non-existent items are italicized

Table 6 Summative numbers of occurrence of the selected pronunciation teaching topics in the interviews of six Finnish learners of English

| Topic | Number of occurrence |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Individual sounds | 1 |
| Word stress | 4 |
| <i>Sentence stress</i> | 0 |
| <i>Intonation</i> | 0 |

The number represents how many of the six interviewees mentioned the task. Non-existent items are italicized

fact that she could not make use of the IPA. Reading aloud was mentioned by three learners, but no-one mentioned tasks that require writing IPA.

Of the pronunciation teaching topics, word stress was mentioned by four pupils and individual sounds by one pupil. The word stress tasks that the pupils referred to were stress placement tasks from the textbook. The pupil who mentioned concentration on individual sounds was of the opinion that the focus of teaching is on individual sounds “to get the words then right”. Sentence stress and intonation were not mentioned by the pupils. The summative numbers of occurrence are presented in Table 6.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented in this paper give reason to suggest that for the most part, teaching follows textbooks. The teaching techniques that are frequent in textbooks are used in teaching, whereas task types and pronunciation teaching topics that are missing from the textbooks are also non-existent in teaching. Reading aloud, reading IPA, and imitation are frequent in textbooks, so they are also present in the classroom observation data and learner interview data. Sentence stress and intonation are not explicitly addressed in textbooks. Hence, they seem not to be explicitly taught either.

Based on the study, it seems that textbooks have possibly turned into poor masters instead of good servants (cf. Cunningsworth, 1984, p. 1). The curriculum should set the goals, and the teacher should use their expertise to choose how and with which tools and materials the goals are best achieved. If textbooks are

followed blindly, important aspects may end up being neglected in teaching. The present study demonstrates how sentence stress and intonation can be left out of teaching if they are not addressed in textbooks. For the Finnish context at least, a step away from the strictly textbook-oriented teaching tradition would be welcome. The goal set by the national core curriculum emphasise intelligibility, and as discussed earlier, suprasegmental features play an important role in that. However, when these features are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, the textbook authors have obviously not understood their importance, and they are not explicitly dealt with in textbooks. In a textbook-oriented teaching tradition, this leads to insufficient teaching in these areas.

It is not known why the national core curriculum does not explicitly mention pronunciation teaching in the text itself, but only in the proficiency scale appendix. It is hard to believe that pronunciation would be regarded so unimportant that it is not worth mentioning (cf. the overall oral emphasis of the curriculum). Perhaps pronunciation is thought such an integral part of oral skills that it is taken for granted? In any case, I suspect that the lack of explicit notions on pronunciation in the core curriculum has given the textbook publishers the impression that it does not need to be addressed in detail.

This downside of the core curriculum is fortunately in the process of being corrected, as the National Board of Education is reforming the core curriculum. The national core curricula are renewed in approximately 10-year cycles; the next curriculum reform for basic education (=primary and lower secondary level) takes place by 2016. The draft for the new core curriculum includes *clarity of pronunciation* as a goal, and encourages to observe and practise plenty of pronunciation at lower secondary level. For primary level, the core curriculum is more specific in regards to pronunciation. It states that the teacher is to guide the learner to train pronunciation, intonation and rhythm, with intelligible speech as a goal. Observing and practising plenty of pronunciation, word and sentence stress, and intonation are explicitly mentioned in the text. In addition, teaching to read phonetic script is mentioned (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

The present study implies that fidelity to the textbook or textbook fatigue can be harmful to English pronunciation teaching. If pronunciation is not explicitly mentioned in the national curriculum, publishers may not understand its importance and project a very narrow approach to it in textbooks. In addition, publishers favour proven formulas; textbook content seems to be recycled to a great extent (Keenan, 2012). As for the teachers, they need encouragement and good training in how to teach pronunciation, to reclaim their power from the textbooks. Teachers need to trust their expertise and create their own way to achieve the learning objectives that are set by the curriculum. They should be the masters who use a variety of servants, such as textbooks and other teaching materials and tools, in order to coach their learners towards intelligible pronunciation.

The results of the present study are by no means generalizable, but they do demonstrate the danger of textbook hegemony to English pronunciation teaching, at least in the context of the study. Differences in both textbooks and in teaching may vary substantially from context to context, as proven by a comparison between the

Canadian textbook analysis (Derwing et al., 2012) and the Finnish textbook analysis (Tergujeff, 2013). Based on the present study, the topic clearly calls for systematic research on pronunciation in ELT textbooks (and their use), as already suggested in Sobkowiak (2012).

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