

Repositioning phonetics in teacher education in Sweden from a global ELF perspective: Pre-service teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

Swedish speakers of English have received recognition for their internationally intelligible pronunciation. Reflecting this, English phonetics in teacher education programmes seems to take two extreme positions: either marginalised or acting as a 'pusher' demanding native-like accent from teachers and their pupils. This study aims to explore pre-service teachers' perspectives on the English phonetics lessons that sought 'third' positioning, promoting English as a global lingua franca and bidirectional intelligibility of pronunciation in international contexts. It is argued that phonetics, as a subject, can be a suitable tool for helping teachers to set the goal of English pronunciation in view of the pervasive role of English as a global communication tool. Together with presenting the finding, I discuss its implications for teacher education in Sweden.

Introduction

Background to the study

The Swedish have received recognition for their high proficiency in English (Norrby, 2015). As for pronunciation, how fluent Swedish speakers of English may sound seem to be well-represented by the four celebrities - the YouTube star PewDiePie, the climate activist Greta Thunberg, the psychiatrist Anders Hansen and the late physician and statistician Hans Rosling. As demonstrated by these famous four, there is a variety of English accents among Swedes. Through media and school education,

most Swedes' English accents are more or less influenced by American English (AE) and British English (BE). Some of them have a near-native accent like PewDiePie, while many speak with a mixture of AE or/and BE accents and the features that other Swedes easily recognise as a Swedish accent. The degree of mixture between native English and Swedish accents varies, however, as reflected by Thunberg, Hansen and Rosling. One noticeable feature of Swedish-accented English can be the significantly long consonant following the short vowel in a stressed syllable, as in the realisation of [ˈtʃɪkː.ɪn] for 'chicken' by some Swedes in Thorén (2007).

Despite this audible variety in Swedes' English pronunciation, most of them can be highly intelligible for international listeners (e.g. Jeong, Thorén, & Othman, 2017). This high intelligibility of Swedish-accented English is explicable in view of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) (Jenkins, 2000, 2015). The LFC denotes a limited number of phonetic features that need to be clearly realised for intelligibility in the context of English as a lingua franca (ELF). These features are, most consonants except for the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/, and the alveolar lateral fricative /ɫ/ known as 'dark l', consonant clusters in the word initial, middle and final, the central mid-open unrounded long vowel /ɜː/, vowel length and nuclear tonic stress. As the aforementioned Swedish celebrities represent, fluent Swedish speakers of English realise the LFC features clearly, irrespective of how strong or mild their

Swedish accent is. In fact, many Swedes can be more intelligible than many native English speakers can be in global contexts thanks to their clear articulation. For example, their clean /l/ for the final consonant of words like ‘cool’ would be easier for international listeners than native speakers’ dark /l/. Likewise, using weak forms much less compared to native speakers would also be a winning point for Swedes being intelligible in international communication.

Facing this high intelligibility of Swedish English, English phonetics in teacher education, as the subject meant for promoting good pronunciation, seems to take two extreme positions. It appears to be either marginalised as an insignificant subject remaining by tradition, whose role is only to give pre-service teachers credits to be licensed, or being a ‘pusher’ demanding acquisition of nativelike accent from teachers and their pupils (e.g., see Cunningham, 2015; Sylvén, 2013). The first position, observed from the discourse among university English teachers, should be problematized in light of the fundamental question of what university education is for. The second position can be a little more understandable, as it conforms to the national language policy and the view of many Swedes (Kuteeva, 2014). We can nevertheless still question why Swedes need to aspire nativelike pronunciation despite the fact that they already have highly intelligible pronunciation, and that they actually use English with non-native international people, much more than they do with native speakers (Björkman, 2011; Hult, 2012).

Perceiving these dilemmas emerging from the two current positions of English phonetics, I argue that the subject needs to consider repositioning itself. This will require discovering what Swedes can work on regarding pronunciation, to fulfil their real need for using English as a lingua franca, within their country or around the globe.

Aim of the study

This study aims to explore pre-service teachers’ perspectives on the English phonetics lessons that sought ‘third’ positioning, promoting English as a global ELF and bidirectional intelligibility of pronunciation in international contexts. In the lessons, pronunciation was defined not only as the speaker’s linguistic property but also as mutual process involving both the speaker and listener. Subsequently, intelligibility is considered both the speaker’s ability to be understood and the listener’s ability to understand. The pre-service teachers in the lessons firstly learned basic phonetic concepts and the phonetic core for intelligible pronunciation. More centrally then, they were encouraged to explore the phonetic features of different Englishes in the Three-circle Model of World Englishes (Kachru, 2008), to develop their listener intelligibility. The rationale for the more weight on the listener’s ability was that the teacher students might have been exposed exclusively to AE and BE like most Swedes (Bolton & Meierkord, 2013), and thus they would need more awareness of the accents of other Englishes to be competent ELF users, while they were already intelligible speakers.

Method

Context and respondents

The study was carried out at a Swedish university. Respondents were forty-nine teacher students whose ages ranged from 19 to 46 ($M = 26$). Sixteen were from the high school teacher programme and thirty were from the programme for pre-school to primary school year 3 teachers. The respondents participated in English phonetics lessons separately in two different first-level English courses. However robust *t*-tests (Wilcox & Schönbrodt, 2015) show that there was no group difference among the respondents from two different programmes in terms of their survey responses ($p >$

0.05). The lessons for both high school and primary school teachers last one month with the same structure - attending three lecture sessions, independent reading of the literature and making a presentation as the examination task at the end. The focus of the lessons was not on pronunciation teaching methods but on basic phonetic features of English, pronunciation issues and phenomena emerging from using English as a global lingua franca, and concepts like intelligibility, accommodation and the LFC. For explaining phonetic features to the two groups, I adopted different language samples appropriate for their own target pupils. The student presentations were done in pairs. Each pair demonstrated their understanding of global ELF and the LFC, and explored one variety of World Englishes, so that all attending in the examination seminars could help each other raise awareness of different English accents.

Survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire comprised 10 closed questions with a 5-point Likert scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ and an open-ended question at the end. Table 1 presents the issues on which the questions elicited the respondents’ perspectives.

Data collection and analysis

Respondents answered the survey questions written on the paper at the beginning of the examination seminars. Before they answered, I informed them that their responses would be used as data for my study. To ensure respondents’ anonymity, the survey did not include questions for the participants’ names and demographic profiles. The age information was from the course enrolment records, and thus it was impossible to match individuals’ answers with their ages, which could reveal their identities. In addition, the respondents put their answers into an envelope on a table, from which I was away.

Table 1. Survey items classified into six concerned issues.

Issues	Items
1. Whether English phonetics is necessary in teacher education	1
2. Whether learning phonetics from a global ELF perspective was helpful	2, 4 & 9
3. Whether phonetics should focus on American English(AE) and British English (BE) accents	3
4. Whether learning phonetics is helpful for developing ELF speaker intelligibility	5 & 6
5. Whether learning phonetics is helpful for developing ELF listener intelligibility	7 & 8
6. Whether the phonetics lessons had impact on their perspectives	10 & 11

Since there was no group difference in the answers, the two respondent groups were treated as one cohort for data analysis. For reporting purposes, I reduced 5 points to 3 points by merging ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ into ‘agree’, ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’ into ‘disagree’ and keeping ‘neutral’ as it is. I then counted frequencies of the three points, which I eventually converted into percentages. Finally, responses to 11 questions were transformed into the six issues in Table 1. Since data did not have a normal distribution, robust and non-parametric inferential tests were performed for within-group comparisons and correlation checks (Larson-Hall, 2015).

Results and Discussion

Overall, respondents were positive about positioning phonetics as a subject promoting a global ELF perspective and both speaker and listener intelligibility

of pronunciation in ELF communication.

First, regarding whether phonetics is a necessary subject in teacher education, 67.3 % of respondents thought it is, 20.4% were neutral and 12.2 % thought it is not. Second, about learning phonetics from a global ELF perspective, 81.6 % of participants were positive, 10.2 % neutral and only 8.2 % negative. Third, with the idea that phonetics should focus on American and British English pronunciations, 32.5% agreed and 32.8% did not agree, while 34.7% remained neutral. Fourth, regarding the issue of whether learning the LFC is helpful for developing their own and their pupils' speaker intelligibility, 75.4% were positive, 8.2% were neutral, and 16.3% were negative. Fifth, concerning whether learning phonetics from a global ELF perspective helps themselves and their pupils develop listener intelligibility, 79.5% replied that it does, 12.2% were neutral, and 6.1% answered that it does not. Finally, to the question of whether the phonetics lessons they took had impact on their responses to the above issues, 67.4% answered it did, 20.4% were neutral, and 12.2% replied it did not.

For the open-ended question about the impact of the phonetic lessons on their perceptions, some positive answers are:

“I have found [phonetics] to be very interesting. Intelligibility and accommodation are very important features to learn in order to become a good communicator. This will be of great help to me in teaching English.”

“It’s been interesting and has showed me something new.”

“This has been a good experience for me as a future teacher. Thank you for being critical towards the English language, and for opening up for a new perspective for me.”

“Difficult but fun. A lot of new info, that I did not previously know.”

On the other hand, negative responses mostly emerged from feeling phonetics difficult, as seen in the following extracts:

“Phonetics is hard, sometimes unnecessary.”

“Difficult and hard to understand.”

“I think IPA is tough and it is unnecessary for me to learn.”

“Hard. Not clear how we should work with our students with it.”

To see how the respondents' perspectives on the issues interact with each other, non-parametric correlation tests were performed. Table 2 presents significant correlations.

Table 2. Correlation among the perspectives on the six issues (N = 49)

Issues	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Need for phonetics	—					
2. Global ELF perspective	.493**	—				
3. Focusing on AE & BE		-.400**	—			
4. ELF speaker intelligibility	.391**			—		
5. ELF listener intelligibility	.628**	.554**		.424**	—	
6. Impact of the phonetic lessons		.446**		.291*	.395**	—

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

First, there is a high correlation between seeing the need for phonetics in teacher education and thinking it helps develop the listener's intelligibility in ELF. Gaining a global ELF perspective and developing intelligible pronunciation for ELF communication show relatively tight correlations with the need for phonetics, which however is not correlated with focusing on AE and BE accents.

Second, there is a negative correlation between Issue 2 and Issue 3. This seems to indicate that those positive about the role of English as a global lingua franca tend to disagree with focusing on AE and BE pronunciations, whereas those preferring to learn Standard English accents did not welcome the ELF perspective.

Third, it is also interesting that positive attitude towards the ELF perspective is highly correlated with seeing the need for developing the listener's intelligibility, while not with seeing the need for developing the speaker's intelligibility. Presumably, the Swedish pre-service teachers may have agreed on my view that their pronunciations are already intelligible internationally but they would still need to be more able to understand different English accents. This interpretation is aligned with the phonetic description of Swedish-accented English in light of the LFC (Jenkins, 2000, 2015), presented in the introduction section. However, a robust paired samples *t* test shows that there is no significant difference in the respondents' attitude towards the needs for developing speaker ability and for developing listener ability ($p > .5$), indicating that they still think both are necessary for themselves and their future pupils.

One more point worth noting is what the correlation outcome suggests regarding the impact of the phonetic lessons on the respondents' perceptions on phonetics and English pronunciation. The reasonably tight correlations that the impact

has with being positive about seeing English as a global ELF, and with listener intelligibility seems to signal that the lessons have achieved its objectives quite satisfactorily. This interpretation is agreed with the fact that the positive attitude towards English as a global lingua franca is more prominent than the preference of AE and BE accents ($p < .01$), although the Swedish youths in general are known to prefer native English (Hult, 2012). On the other hand, the correlation result reveals that the pre-service teacher participants did not come to think learning phonetics is necessary as a result of taking the phonetics lessons.

Conclusions

This study looked into pre-service teachers' perspectives on English phonetics, introduced to them as a subject promoting both receptive and productive intelligibility of pronunciation in international communication from a global lingua franca perspective. Considering that Swedes already have a high degree of speaker intelligibility, need for developing listener intelligibility, that is, ability to understand a wide range of English accents, had a little more emphasis in their learning. The findings suggest that many of the teacher students that participated in the study positively responded to this positioning of English phonetics. However, some exhibited negativity towards learning phonetics itself, and towards the view of English as a lingua franca. Data collected for the study are not capable of providing an in-depth understanding of both positive and negative perceptions on the experimented position of English phonetics. Therefore, future research can be suggested for finding out more about teacher students' thoughts and opinions about studying phonetics from a global ELF perspective.

Although indicative yet, the message that the findings put forward is quite clear. Prospective teachers in Swe-

den are ready to embrace today's English identity as chiefly a global communication medium (Galloway, 2017), besides it being the language of some nations. They therefore seem to be ready to set the goal of teaching and learning pronunciation of the language in view of its global identity. What I hope for with this study is this readiness of teacher students for redefining English phonetics will be founded by teacher educators, textbook writers and curriculum developers, and programme responsible people, leading them to consider properly responding to this readiness for changes.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to my department, for generously funding my trip to the conference.

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