

# Teaching Pronunciation in Cyprus

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**1 Introduction** The purpose of this paper is to describe views and practices in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) with respect to Pronunciation Teaching in public secondary schools (henceforth *Gymnasia*<sup>1</sup>) of Cyprus. For this reason, six sources of data were reviewed. Firstly, a questionnaire was administered to teachers of English in order to see how they viewed pronunciation in relation to the other language skills and how they approached it in class. Furthermore, syllabi and the curriculum for teaching English were collected from *Gymnasia* and the Cyprus Ministry of Education and were reviewed and compared with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*<sup>2</sup>. They were also compared and contrasted with the content of an interview which the Ministry of Education provided to the present author along with information on English teachers' pre-service and in-service training. The actual books taught at public *Gymnasia* (*Magic Moments* series, Kane 2003) were also examined in order to acquire a general idea of how the area of pronunciation is viewed and practised in *Gymnasia* of Cyprus (Kyprianou 2006).

## 2 Sources of Data – Findings

### 2.1: Questionnaires administered to teachers of English

In order to find out how teachers of English view and practise pronunciation teaching, they were asked a series of questions. Data were obtained by means of a questionnaire which was distributed to public secondary school teachers (see table 1 for distribution of participants).

Participants' Information	Total (N=61)
Age	31- 41 : 1.6% 41- 50 + : 41% 51+ : 57.3%
Years of teaching experience	10 to 20 +
Greek as native language	100% of total sample
Native speakers of English	None

Table 1: Distribution of participants

The analysis of the questionnaires revealed that there are indeed statistically significant differences in the way teachers of English view and practise the teaching of

<sup>1</sup> The *Gymnasio* is the first 3-year circle of public secondary education. The subjects at the *Gymnasio* are common for all the pupils. The teaching periods are 37weekly for all three forms. One of the essential pylons which support Cypriot Secondary Education is the knowledge of foreign languages. For this reason pupils at the *Gymnasio* are taught two foreign languages (English and French) ([http://www.cyprusnet.com/content.php?article\\_id=2858&subject=standalone](http://www.cyprusnet.com/content.php?article_id=2858&subject=standalone)).

<sup>2</sup> This document (CEFR) provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning a foreign language and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. It describes in a comprehensive manner a) the competences necessary for communication, b) the related knowledge and skills and c) the situations and domains of communication ([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp)).

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pronunciation in relation to the other language skills (see table 2). It seems that although most of the teachers

- say that they feel confident in teaching pronunciation,
  - say that they were indeed instructed in how to teach it during their studies,
  - say that the books include activities for this skill,
- they
- don't devise their own activities to improve students' pronunciation,
  - don't always teach this skill,
  - sometimes neglect it when they don't have time,
  - don't test their students on it,
  - don't consider this skill when they grade their students,
  - don't devote much time to it during a lesson.

<i>Question Item</i>	<i>Answers on Pronunciation</i>
1. I feel confident in teaching this skill	72.1% Yes 24.6% No 3.3% No Answer <b>t=4.624</b> <b>p= .0001 &lt; .05 *</b>
2. During my studies I was instructed in teaching this skill	73.7% Yes 26.3% No <b>t=4.204</b> <b>p= .0001 &lt; .05 *</b>
3. I use a variety of activities to teach this skill	42.6% Yes 50.8% No 6.5 % N/A <b>t=0.665</b> <b>p= .5085 &gt; .05</b>
4. My students like this skill	44.3% Yes 55.7% No <b>t=0.896</b> <b>p= .3737 &gt; .05</b>
5. I like teaching this skill	42.6% Yes 57.4% No <b>t=1.169</b> <b>p= .2471 &gt; .05</b>
6. I follow the coursebook when teaching this skill	51% Yes 49% No <b>t=0.755</b> <b>p= .4532 &gt; .05</b>
7. The class coursebook includes activities for this skill	90.1% Yes 9.9% No <b>t=10.486</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05*</b>
8. I devise my own activities for this skill	8% Yes 82% No <b>t=9.736</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05*</b>
9. I always teach this skill	21.3% Yes 78.7% No <b>t=5.475</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05*</b>
10. I sometimes neglect this skill when I don't have time	83.6% Yes 16.4% No <b>t=7.087</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05*</b>
11. I test my students on this skill	6.5% Yes 93.5% No <b>t=13.781</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05*</b>
12. When I grade my students I take this skill into account	9.8% Yes 90.2% No

	<b>t=10.560</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05 *</b>
13. I devote a lot of time to this skill during a lesson	3.3% Yes 96.7% No <b>t=20.418</b> <b>p= .0000 &lt; .05 *</b>
14. The ministry has given guidelines on how to tackle this skill (e.g. what to teach, time spent on it)	47.6% Yes 52.4% No <b>t=0.375</b> <b>p= .7087 &gt; .05</b>

Table 2: Questionnaire results

(\* indicates statistically significant results)

The participants were also asked which skill they consider to be the most important to teach and which one they consider the least important. 73.8% of the teachers responded that pronunciation is the least important of the skills listed, indicating how they view the teaching of pronunciation in relation to the other skills. This is a significant difference compared to the other skills and it indicates the fact that pronunciation is seen as inferior. It is very surprising that most of the teachers view pronunciation as the least important of all the skills listed, and maybe this reflects why pronunciation is not taught at all. Although the books include certain tasks on pronunciation issues, they are usually neglected by teachers (83.6% skip pronunciation activities and 78.7% do not always teach pronunciation). The fact that the Ministry does not include these tasks as obligatory material and furthermore the fact that no reference is made in the curriculum and syllabi to pronunciation material, encourages teachers not to pay any attention to pronunciation.

## 2.2: Interview with the Inspectress of English teachers (Ministry of Education)

It was made evident from the interview that the Ministry and the inspectors of English do not provide teachers with concrete, specific guidelines on teaching pronunciation. It lies up to the teacher whether or not to use pronunciation tasks in the classroom. Although the teachers receive training twice a year on topics such as teaching writing or teaching speaking in general, no specific reference is made to teaching pronunciation during this in-service training (Prodromou 2005).

2.2.1 Pre-service training: During the pre-service training that is offered to all English teachers by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute<sup>3</sup> before they are appointed, specific training takes place in the areas of teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking. No reference is made to the teaching of pronunciation. A positive issue that should be tackled here is that teachers are trained to use new technologies in the classroom (computers and Microsoft office software). Nevertheless, no specific software on the teaching of pronunciation is used and no phonetic training takes place (Pedagogical Institute 2005-6).

2.2.2: In-service training: More than half of the teachers (52.4%) claim that the Ministry has not given them guidelines on how to treat pronunciation teaching, and consequently they devote little time to it (96.7%). 57.4% of the teachers do not like teaching pronunciation. The coordinator of English inspectors made it clear that during in-service training, no reference is made to pronunciation specifically, since the ministry promotes

<sup>3</sup> The Cyprus Pedagogical Institute is responsible for the pre- and in- service training of all the teachers who work at public secondary schools (<http://www.pi.ac.cy>).

integration of skills. On the other hand, the teachers seem to receive specific seminars on teaching writing, which is a separate skill (Prodromou 2005).

### 2.3: ELT Textbooks taught at public Gymnasia

As far as the books are concerned, the *Magic Moments* series (Kane 2003) does include pronunciation material for students. Each unit of each student's book includes specific pronunciation tasks like listening, repeating and drilling. Follow-up activities to reinforce the item taught are also included to provide practice and activate the new information that the students receive. Furthermore, listening and speaking activities are also introduced in each unit to expose students to authentic audio texts in English and to train their ear. According to the interview (Prodromou 2005) the teachers are obliged to use the audio material accompanying the books. In addition there are language labs at most schools where the students can watch video material.

### 2.4: Syllabi – Curricula

As far as the syllabi collection from Gymnasia is concerned, it was seen that only grammar and writing areas are included (usually tenses and composition types). No specific pronunciation areas are mentioned. The English curriculum collected by the Ministry of Education does not mention pronunciation either, although the other skills are stressed and described extensively (Department of Secondary Education 1999).

### 2.5: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The CEFR (2001) was carefully reviewed to see how the teaching of pronunciation should be approached, what the phonological competences are that a learner of a foreign language should have and how learners may develop their ability to pronounce a language. It was concluded that most of the points of the CEFR are not being followed concerning pronunciation teaching. The Ministry follows only the CEFR general competence levels and does not use the corresponding phonological control levels. The guidelines on how a learner should develop his or her abilities in pronouncing a foreign language are not strictly followed. Only certain points are practised in the classrooms of Gymnasia in Cyprus, such as listening to audio and video material with native speakers and chorused imitation of the teacher. Individualised laboratory work or working with phonetically transcribed texts and explicit phonetic training is not practised. Phonetic symbols are not explained and used in the classroom either, although they are introduced in the students' books.

**3 Conclusions** Results showed that pronunciation is generally undermined by teachers, most of whom view it as the least important of all skills. No reference is usually made in the syllabi or the curriculum prepared by the Ministry concerning pronunciation and, according to the interview, teachers are not obliged to teach it. Priority is given to other skills like reading and writing.

Revision of the curriculum in relation to the CEFR's guidelines and areas that a learner of English should be able to perceive and produce is suggested, taking into account the following:

- the sound-units (*phonemes*) of the language and their realisation in particular contexts (*allophones*);
- the phonetic features which distinguish phonemes (*distinctive features*, e.g. voicing, rounding, nasality, plosion);
- the phonetic composition of words (*syllable structure*, the sequence of phonemes, word stress, word tones);
- sentence phonetics (*prosody*)
- sentence stress and rhythm
- intonation;
- phonetic reduction
- vowel reduction

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- strong and weak forms
- assimilation
- elision.

CEFR (2001:116-117)

At the time being the above points are not taught at public secondary schools, and maybe this is the reason why students face so many difficulties in the area of pronouncing English. Although their overall competence levels in English are of high standard (writing, grammar), they fail in pronunciation areas such as distinguishing vowel sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation.

Furthermore, teachers could be trained in methodological issues concerning the teaching of pronunciation during their pre- and in-service training, which is the case regarding the rest of the language skills.

To conclude, “pronunciation can no longer be ignored; today intelligible pronunciation is seen as an essential component of communicative competence” (Morley 1991:513). If we want to communicate effectively, we have to know and use English pronunciation intelligibly and correctly.

### 4 References

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