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Peer pronunciation teaching: Initial training of Czech pre-service primary teachers

Kristýna Červinková Poesová
Charles University, Prague

The current paper attempts to shed light on student teachers' ability to transform phonological knowledge into a pronunciation activity for primary pupils. The ad hoc study reported herein was inspired by the different extent of pre-service teachers' knowledge in the initial phase of teacher training – on the one hand, detailed knowledge of the subject matter, i.e., English phonetics and phonology, and on the other, very basic knowledge of pronunciation instruction. The study draws on data derived from multiple sources over a period of six years: peer teaching observations and reflections, lesson plans, and feedback provided by the teacher trainer. Despite the limited scope of pedagogical knowledge, the micro-teachings demonstrated elements of pedagogical content knowledge, especially in the lead-ins of pronunciation activities.

Keywords: teacher training, peer teaching, pedagogical content knowledge, English pronunciation teaching, primary education



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1 Introduction

Teaching pronunciation effectively might be a dream for many foreign language teachers. One way of making this dream come true could involve the development of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). This synthesis of content and pedagogical knowledge referred to as the ability to “do things effectively in language classrooms” (Murphy, 2017, p. 23) is believed to create the uniqueness of the teaching profession, clearly distinguishing a teacher from a content specialist, for instance a pronunciation teacher from a phonetician (Baker & Murphy, 2011; Shulman, 1987).

Although introduced by Shulman in the late 1980s, the nature of PCK has been widely debated by educational experts to date (Neumann et al., 2019). For example, Van Dijk (2009) conceptualized it as follows: “PCK is understood as topic-specific teacher knowledge that involves the transformation of content and pedagogical knowledge into instruction” (p. 19). Similarly, Bromme (1997 quoted in Neumann et al., 2019) states that “content-specific pedagogical knowledge is a necessary pre-requisite to finding adequate representations of subject matter content, and deciding about the selection and sequencing of ideas, that is, to enable transforming subject-matter structure into an instructional structure” (p. 850). Finally, Nilsson (2008, p. 1284) views PCK as dynamic knowledge generated in practice through the capability of the teacher to combine their knowledge of pedagogy, the subject matter, and contextual knowledge. The present research focuses on the interplay of these three types of knowledge, specifically in the process of transforming pre-service teachers’ knowledge of the English sound system into meaningful and comprehensible forms within the context of primary pronunciation teaching.

2 The study: Research design

2.1 Motivation for the research

The first impulse to carry out the research presented in this paper arose when a five-year-long study programme for primary teachers with English specialisation¹ was cancelled permanently in the academic year 2019/2020, after approximately twenty-five years of existence. It was replaced by a newly accredited programme in which the time devoted to individual specialised fields was dramatically reduced – from nine to five semesters. In the original study programme, in the first two years the focus was put on language, linguistics, and cultural studies. In the following three years, the students were trained mainly in ELT methodology. Within the linguistic strand the study programme offered the luxury of four semesters of English phonetics and phonology spread equally over the first two years.

When the course was taken over by the author of this paper, it had been an unwritten rule to do some practically oriented activities in the last semester of English phonetics and phonology. In the first couple of years, this involved reading aloud or dramatising selected children’s books, and this gradually changed to pronunciation peer teaching. Within the microcosm of the phonetics courses it seemed logical that the knowledge and skills acquired in the first three semesters² would be looked at from the pronunciation instruction perspective in the last

¹ The whole teacher training programme was provided by the Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague. Only the specialisation (e.g., English, German, Music, Drama) chosen by the students in the first year was the responsibility of the corresponding departments e.g., the courses within the English specialisation were provided by the Department of the English Language and Literature at the same faculty.

² The content of the courses English phonetics and phonology I–III focused on the description of the English sound system including segmentals (vowels, consonants), processes of connected speech (assimilation, elision, linking),

semester. This would be in line with Murphy's (2017) assumption that "teachers need at least some knowledge of phonology before the development of PCK becomes possible" (p. 23). The main task for the student teachers was to prepare a pronunciation activity according to certain instructions, peer teach it, and then reflect on that experience. Bearing in mind that it was the first peer teaching experience for the vast majority of students, the feedback towards them was both encouraging and constructive.

Taking into consideration the broader perspective of the whole study programme, it is important to state that when the students did the peer teaching, they were almost 'blank slates' as they had not attended any general pedagogy or ELT methodology courses yet; they had only spent a week observing classes at state schools, and these sessions did not necessarily include English. Therefore, the factors that probably influenced their performance were their beliefs and prior experience with English (pronunciation) learning. To summarize, on the micro level it made sense to introduce pronunciation teaching as the culmination of a three-semester-long phonetics course, even though the students' didactic skills were rather intuitive or non-existent. On the macro level, the pronunciation teaching activity was done too early, as the students were not educated or trained sufficiently and systematically in this respect. This particular situation in the English specialisation provided a rare window of opportunity for ad hoc research, looking more closely at how the students coped with the challenging task.

2.2 Treatment: Preparing teacher trainees to teach pronunciation

The student teachers were given clear guidelines on how to prepare and conduct a pronunciation activity in front of their peers. They were clearly instructed to devise a 15-minute-long activity on a pronunciation feature from one of the four areas: segmentals, connected speech, suprasegmentals, or miscellaneous (e.g., silent letters, homophones, accent differences). The obligatory parts were a lead-in (during which the topic had to be introduced interactively with pupils' active involvement) and pronunciation practice (oriented either perceptually and/or productively). The submission of a detailed activity plan was required. To provide more support, the lecturer taught one activity herself and the students were guided through a model activity plan with all its compulsory parts. Furthermore, they were given a number of practical tips, for instance to rehearse the instructions and explanations at home, avoid complicated terminology and follow the principle that "less can sometimes be more". The teacher trainees were also encouraged to adapt or create their own handouts or materials, relying on a wide range of pronunciation books, resource packs and/or recommended online sources. Thus, one of the subsidiary aims was met; the students became acquainted with some of the wealth of pronunciation teaching/learning literature.

While planning their pronunciation activity the student teachers could draw on three types of knowledge bases (Nilsson, 2008). Firstly, *pedagogical knowledge* was presented with the help of Hancock's (2014) pronunciation map. It introduces the landscape of pronunciation teaching based on three essentials: why, how and what to teach. In addition, short-term goal setting was demonstrated and a list of possible techniques for pronunciation teaching suitable for young learners was provided. For the lead-in the teacher illustrated how pupils' involvement can be secured, for instance by eliciting what they already know or having them notice certain things instead of telling them everything. Secondly, the *subject matter knowledge* was revised and briefly discussed as the students had acquired the knowledge of the English sound system in three courses of English phonetics and phonology. Lastly, the *contextual knowledge* was delimited by the age and language level of the imagined pupils: fourth or fifth graders (nine- or ten-year-old children). Regarding the language level it was stated what grammar, lexical fields

syllable and suprasegmental phenomena (stress, rhythm, intonation) and simple comparison with L1. The reference variety was General British and transcription skills were developed throughout the courses.

and language functions the pupils should be able to use (e.g., present and past simple, animals, family members, hobbies, giving directions). The extent of the subject matter knowledge was greater than the other two types of knowledge, which were presented in a condensed form during one or two, 90-minute classes right before the micro-teaching began.

2.3 Participants

The total number of respondents was 73 (F = 70; M = 3), ranging in age from 19–21. They were all undergraduate students at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague, and of Czech nationality. On the basis of multiple observations of primary school teacher trainees, they could be characterised as creative and playful, with a lower level of English but strong determination to stay in the teaching profession. They were didactically inexperienced and were pronunciation peer teaching for the first time. Their dominant knowledge base was the subject matter knowledge gained during three semesters of English phonetics and phonology. They all received identical pronunciation teaching basics in the fourth semester.

2.4 Research questions

The aim of the current study was to document the first encounter of pre-service teachers with the concept of pedagogical content knowledge, specifically to find out whether they were able to present the target content in a way that facilitates pupils' understanding of selected pronunciation aspects. The study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1:** How do teacher trainees evaluate the pronunciation peer teaching experience?
- RQ2:** Does the combination of extensive, yet relatively new subject matter knowledge and rather limited pedagogical knowledge lead to the development of teacher trainees' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)?

2.5 Research methodology, instruments, and data collection procedures

In this study a qualitative research design was adopted, namely a case study, which enables comprehensive understanding of specific situations (Schoch, 2020). Peer teaching was the major source of data collection, with on average 3-4 presentations per lesson, each followed by a 5- to 10-minute feedback session. The immediate oral feedback was given first by the participants and second by the lecturer. As the student teachers' experience giving feedback to their peers was little or non-existent, they were encouraged to say whether and why they liked the activity after each micro-teaching. Furthermore, they were asked to note anything confusing and to share their uncertainties. Building the skill of providing such critical feedback was the second subsidiary aim of the whole peer teaching experience. Delayed and detailed written feedback of the submitted activity plan was given by the lecturer and included critical remarks about the structure and content of the activity, mistake correction, and suggestions for alternative actions. After approximately one month, the peer teaching was completed, and the students were invited to take part in its written evaluation.

Data were collected by means of various research instruments: activity plans, two reflective posters, a survey, and the lecturer's written feedback. All participants had to submit an activity plan before the peer teaching took place. The teacher trainees wrote their reflections about the overall peer teaching experience on two reflective posters, one titled *What did I learn from my colleagues?* and the other with *What did I learn about myself?*. The respondents typically wrote words, phrases, feelings, or drew happy/sad faces. A quick survey was carried out after all the peer teaching had been done, in which the respondents were invited to write individually about

which three pronunciation activities they enjoyed most and to state the reasons behind their choices. While the activity plans were named, the reflective posters and surveys were anonymous. The lecturer's written feedback included comments on the lesson plans and observation notes from all micro-teachings. The four years of data were amassed over six years (between 2013–2020), with one year excluded due to the teacher's parental leave and one due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The reflective posters provided answers to the first research question, and the remaining instruments were used to answer the second research question.

2.6 Data analysis procedures

The written responses, comments, and notes were carefully read and categorized depending on the nature of the data. For data from the reflective posters, a thematic analysis was carried out, whereas data gathered via the survey were ranked from the most to the least frequently appreciated pronunciation activity. Moreover, the reasons behind the most positively evaluated activities were thematically grouped together. The last analysis involved the lecturer's observation notes and the feedback she gave students on their lesson plans. These data were analysed for a common theme, in this case for critical remarks and limitations.

3 Results of the study

3.1 Teacher trainees' reflections and evaluation of peer teaching experience

Data from the reflective posters³ were gathered, with the first poster garnering comments from 71 student teachers about the things they had learnt from their colleagues. The responses were grouped into 23 categories, most of which were related to: general didactic principles: easy explanation; staying calm; using pictures; new activities; use of physical movements; smile is nice; engaging pupils in the lead-in; and saying all instructions. Only two categories can be considered pronunciation-specific: a) positive comments about teaching pronunciation aids ($n = 7$), for instance, "rubber bands are cool"; and b) a neutral comment stating "practising perception and production more than writing" ($n = 1$).

The second poster focused on participants' views of their personal gains from the course, in particular, what they learnt about themselves. It yielded 73 comments. The number of identified categories decreased to six, with two categories containing almost half of all comments, including comments capturing students' affective states: a) positive comments ($n = 25$), for example, "I enjoy teaching", "nervous but I loved it", "I want to be a teacher"; and b) negative comments ($n = 16$), for example, "When I'm nervous I hesitate", "feeling unprepared". The other categories included: a) acknowledgement of making mistakes ($n = 7$), for example, "my level of English diminishes when I teach"; b) need to be prepared ($n = 7$), for example, "you should always have a plan B"; c) clear and simple instructions ($n = 5$); and d) miscellaneous ($n = 13$). The only two reactions reflecting pronunciation expressed the need to improve their pronunciation.

3.2 Teacher trainees' reasons for the most appreciated pronunciation activities

In-depth analysis of the most appreciated micro-teachings of every year is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the following list presents the rationale behind the most popular pronunciation activities, as expressed by the teacher trainees:

³ Due to the anonymous nature of the data, the author is unable to refer to individual participant codes where their responses are quoted in the text.

- using characters, invented or real, because it is easy to remember – e.g., “Lucy’s Toby and Eva’s bunny with hearing problems are unforgettable”, “Tom and Jerry for teaching weak and strong forms”, “Wanda and Victor for teaching /w/ and /v/ contrast”;
- using teaching aids because they are playful and entertaining – e.g., “feather or a piece of paper for aspiration”;
- providing clear illustrations and explanations of how the target sounds are created because it is easy to understand – e.g., “beaver’s teeth and sending a kiss”;
- being immersed in the pronunciation activity – e.g., “I did not realize I was learning; I enjoyed the activity and I didn’t even notice it was focused on dental fricatives”;
- using facilitating tools/helpers – e.g., pictures, photos, flags, gestures, whispering, flash cards, rubber bands, and movement;
- well-prepared presentations;
- giving clear instructions;
- continuous involvement of pupils and interactive classes.

3.3 Lecturer’s evaluation of participants’ lesson plans and presentation notes

Before the results in this section are summarised, it is important to realize that all teacher trainees successfully completed the micro-teaching, except for one whose pronunciation activity turned out to be extremely chaotic. Overall, a few teacher trainees did excellent or weak micro-teachings, but most were average in their performance. As opposed to the data gathered with the two reflective posters, in which positive features related to pronunciation teaching prevailed, the analysis of the submitted lesson plans and notes from the presentations revealed that there was a lack of knowledge in the participants’ pronunciation teaching. The following list includes the weaknesses of the pronunciation tasks that occurred more than five times, either within one year or over several. In the lead-ins two problems reoccurred; either the tasks were rushed through (probably because of nerves) or the explanations of the rules were too lengthy and/or did not encourage pupils’ engagement. Another shortcoming identified mostly in the lead-ins was the use of complicated terminology, for instance, phoneme, grapheme, and/or fricatives. Furthermore, the respondents quite often confused sounds and letters, e.g., /b/, /p/, and /h/ for /bi:/, <p> /pi:/, and <h> /etʃ/, formulated unclear aims, gave confusing instructions, and made grammatical, pronunciation, and content-related mistakes.

4 Discussion of results and key findings

The analysis of the peer and respondents’ own feedback revealed two interesting findings. Firstly, the vast majority of comments were related to general principles of teaching foreign languages rather than specifically to English pronunciation, which may confirm the absence of ELT methodology in the training at that stage. Secondly, a greater variety of comments was identified when the students assessed their classmates than when they were rating themselves. When the attention was turned to their own performances, less variety occurred and the feedback was dominated by similar themes, in particular the emotions, both positive and negative, that the teaching experience provoked. Comments about being nervous and its effect on students’ skills resonated largely through all the investigated years. The other frequently mentioned themes – making mistakes and the level of preparedness – seem to be connected to student teachers’ initial lack of confidence. Gaining confidence (e.g., by rehearsing at home) may lead to fewer mistakes. The pronunciation peer teaching experience can therefore be evaluated as enriching and overall positive.

Despite the great variety of micro-teachings, the reasons for choosing the best ones were narrowed down to a few items each year. The most appreciated moments involved clear

understanding of a pronunciation feature, which was typically achieved with the help of an effective teaching aid, often a real or invented character (see §3.2). Subsequently, these topics seemed to be easily retained in the respondents' memory. Such reflections arguably constitute evidence of PCK development. Moreover, the notions to be taught were selected with respect to the age and level of young learners, possible complexities were reduced, for instance, the difference between American and British varieties was illustrated using only one feature, abstract concepts were visualised (e.g., smaller and bigger dots for stress patterns), and teaching materials were employed (Janík, 2008).

On the one hand we have pre-service teachers' subjective idea of what contributed to the efficacy of the presented pronunciation topics, and this is counter-balanced by the lecturer's observation, feedback, and long experience. It is also worth investigating further the phonological content-related errors identified in approximately half of the presentations each year (e.g., confusion of voiced vs. voiceless consonants). This finding suggests that the subject matter knowledge acquired in the phonetics courses might not have been completely consolidated at the time of peer teaching. In fact, the degree to which the phonological knowledge is applied – and applied correctly – in actual pronunciation teaching seems to be a window through which we can see how well the teacher trainees have actually understood the subject matter (Nilsson, 2008).

5 Conclusions and implications

Despite the participants' merely intuitive knowledge of pedagogy and ELT methodology, the findings provide examples of successful PCK for pronunciation teaching at a primary school level. Drawing on the peer evaluation, the most appreciated activities contained a playful and/or creative element, were well-prepared, and easy to understand/remember. The lecturer's feedback revealed limitations in the investigated domains of knowledge, for instance, using the wrong phonemic symbols, employing difficult terminology, poorly prepared lead-ins or long explanations without pupils' engagement. Naturally, the ability to select and structure the pronunciation activity so that it resulted in pupils' understanding varied among the teacher trainees.

On a more general note, peer teaching played a crucial role in primary teacher pronunciation training. In the assigned activity, the participants experienced first-hand the necessity to reorganize the subject matter, to transform it into meaningful forms. All four parts of the peer teaching experience – preparing for teaching and teaching itself, stepping into the pupils' shoes and reflecting – contributed equally to the “moments of revelation” which are likely to have long lasting effects, helping to form future teachers' identities and cognitions. No matter how time-consuming the inclusion of micro-teaching might be, expert literature or lecturers' well-meant recommendations can never fully replace direct experience (Murphy, 2017).

The outcomes of this research are currently being implemented into the newly accredited study programme which contains only two semesters of English phonetics and phonology. Contrary to the original intention not to include any pronunciation teaching aspects due to time constraints, short micro-teachings on selected phenomena have been included (e.g., teaching word stress) for two main reasons. First, that the ability to transform theoretical knowledge into actual teaching can be trained to some extent even before it is thoroughly covered within ELT courses, and secondly, little time is dedicated to pronunciation teaching in the Czech educational context (Červinková Poesová & Uličná, 2016). Therefore, for some respondents the pronunciation peer teaching squeezed within the phonetic course might be, sadly, the only one they experience. In conclusion, specialized training in pronunciation pedagogy plays an important role in building the confidence of future pronunciation teachers (Burri et al., 2017; Buss, 2017) and should always have a firm position in the teacher education programmes.

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About the author

Kristýna Červinková Poesová is a Lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague, where she teaches English phonetics and phonology and general English courses in various teacher training programmes. Her research interests include effectiveness of pronunciation teaching and learning, pronunciation instruction at a primary level and accent attitudes. She co-edits IATEFL's PronSIG bi-annual journal *Speak Out!*.

E-mail: kristyna.poesova@pedf.cuni.cz