

**BODORÍK M.**  
**TEACHING ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION**  
**IN THE FIELD OF SLOVAK RESEARCH**

**Abstract.** During the last three decades, English has been an important component of Slovak education system. In this connection, English pronunciation is a crucial feature and a difficult skill for Slovak learners to acquire. The paper analyses how English pronunciation was surveyed and studied by selected Slovak scholars. The analysis of six Slovak authors and their research papers focuses on the individual aspects that affect the uptake of English pronunciation by Slovak learners in a broader context connected to segmental and suprasegmental features of English phonology.

**Keywords:** English language, pronunciation, learner, Slovak researcher, teacher, textbook.

**БОДОРИК М.**  
**ОБУЧЕНИЕ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ПРОИЗНОШЕНИЮ**  
**В ТРУДАХ СЛОВАЦКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЕЙ**

**Аннотация.** За последние три десятилетия английский язык стал важным компонентом Словацкой системы образования. При этом английское произношение является наиболее актуальным аспектом и самым трудным навыком для словацких учащихся. В статье представлен обзор исследований, проведенных учеными Словакии по данной проблеме. Анализируются работы шести словацких ученых с точки зрения индивидуального подхода к преодолению трудностей освоения английского произношения словацкими учащимися, который базируется на широком контексте в связи с супrasegmentными характеристиками английской фонологии.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык, произношение, учащийся, Словацкий исследователь, преподаватель, учебник.

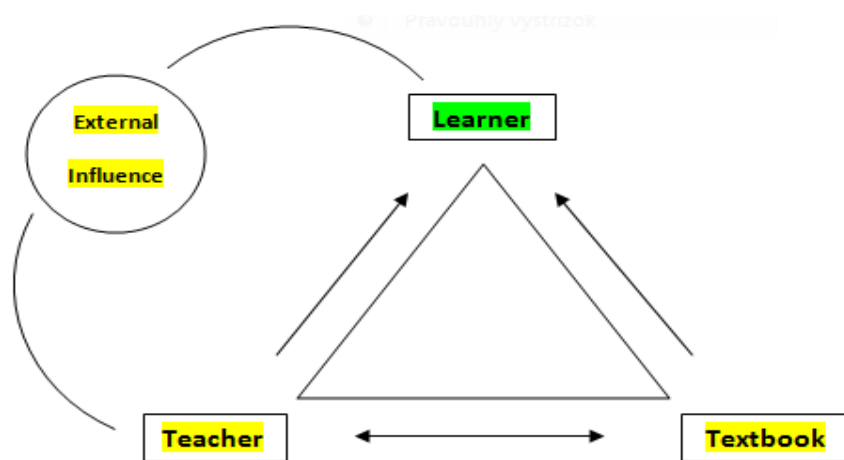
**Introduction**

The English language is a major focus among the foreign languages taught as part of school curriculum in Slovakia during recent decades. The educational environment is fully equipped with different teaching materials and supplementary aids to enhance the process of teaching as well as learning this language. From the beginning of its implementation in the national educational curriculum until today the English language has been given serious attention and focus regarding how to manage the teaching of language skills to prepare learners – independent users of the language to reach a suitable level for their life needs.

Despite these efforts English pronunciation has become a crucial aspect that may be considered a difficult factor in language acquisition. The complications occur due to several factors that affect the learner in his/her process of intelligible English pronunciation uptake. As J. Jenkins

(2011) discusses intelligible pronunciation in terms of EIL (English as International Language) it is understood as the pronunciation features which are decisive to mutual understanding when a non-native speaker of English speaks to another non-native speaker [4]. In this connection, it should be stated that the way a Slovak learner pronounces the foreign language in English must be inherently intelligible to the native speaker of the language. The goal of learning a foreign language is then fulfilled when the speaker of English as a foreign language is both clearly understood by the native as well as the non-native speaker.

As previously mentioned, the acquisition of English pronunciation for Slovak learners is influenced by several important aspects as can be seen in the following scheme.



Educational Diagram: Aspects Influencing Learners' Pronunciation.

The diagram was designed by the author of this paper to show how the learner is influenced when learning English pronunciation. One of the aspects is the learner himself/herself. Abilities, how he/she has acquired grammar knowledge, articulation, spelling, style, possible immersion in the target language, the influence of the mother tongue and its pronunciation features are also to be considered. Within this set is also included the relationship between the mother tongue and the target language on a phonological level as well as their mutual language interference. These all influence and finally result in the ability of each individual to use English pronunciation.

The learner is influenced by the teacher – his/her pronunciation as well as the features of pronunciation that he/she teaches the learners (the arrow towards the learner). According to J. Scrivener, “Pronunciation can be an overlooked area of language teaching, partly because teachers themselves may feel more uncertain about it than about grammar or lexis, worried that they do not have enough technical knowledge to help students appropriately” [9, p. 284].

The textbook also influences the learner as it gives the parameters (tasks, activities) for practising the different aspects of English pronunciation. The textbook activities

also give opportunities for practising various speaking tasks and pronunciation is included within the skill (the arrow points to the learner).

The teacher and the textbook also influence each other as the teacher decides what to do from the student's book, which activities or if he/she wants to add extra material from other sources. The book influences the teacher in such a way that it gives him/her the basis for teaching pronunciation, ideas of what to teach or what to focus on, exercises for working with learners and if the teacher pays attention he/she may find within the mentioned pronunciation features in the book other issues that are not included in the activity section and can prepare his/her own activities based on the textbook style if desired or using his/her own creativity.

The diagram also includes one more specific feature called External Influence (included in the circle). This particular aspect in the learner's educational environment of pronunciation acquisition also plays a key role as it encompasses characteristics such as: immersion in the target (English) language: influence of multimedia, the Internet, newspapers, radio, TV, videos; living in a foreign country (in the past), living with a native speaker of English, contacts with native speakers, one of the parents is a native speaker, visiting a language school (taking a course). All of these included under one term, external influence, are those other factors (not the teacher, not the textbook) that are shaping the learner's manner of speech (pronunciation). That is the reason why it is included in the diagram and that the circle is also linked (two arcs) to the learner as well as to the teacher. That means both learners and teachers are affected by external factors that finally result in the spoken output.

### **Research Conducted in Slovakia**

Considering the above-mentioned data, it is clear that English pronunciation is an important component of the educational environment in Slovak schools and there are various factors that affect the whole process. Therefore, it has been decided to map and analyze how the aforementioned aspects have been recently researched among Slovak academics. The scope of the paper is oriented toward selected authors who have been active in carrying out surveys and published valuable articles, papers linked to the topic of English pronunciation. The idea is based on the study of their published materials (articles, books, research papers) that are available to the public and also the possible impact of these units on individual aspects influencing the acquisition of English pronunciation by Slovak learners. Among the authors to be discussed are three (Beňuš, Bilá, Kráľová) whose primary research field is dedicated to different aspects within English pronunciation and its comparison with the Slovak language. The other three academics (Datko, Pokrivčáková, Reid) are discussed as they have lately published articles also related to the topic of this paper.

The following authors deal with pronunciation in a broader sense rather than a precise discussion of learners and their needs. The researchers have made investigations into the broad area of phonetics and phonology and focused on different aspects, the results of which may be applied to the teaching of pronunciation. These findings may influence the Slovak learners' pronunciation in specific ways.

Š. Beňuš published a number of articles dealing with the features of Slovak learners and the field of English pronunciation. The following titles represent his field of study: *Accentual Phrases in Slovak and Hungarian* (2014), *Prosody, Voice Assimilation, and Conversational Fillers* (2014), *Slovak Prosody in the Phonetics-phonology Debate: Yers and Emergent Prosodic Breaks* (2014), *Rhythm and Tempo in Slovak* (2012), *Phonetic Variation in Slovak Yer and Non-yer Vowels* (2012), *Stress and Phonemic Length in the Perception of Slovak Vowels* (2012), *On the Phonetic Status of Syllabic Consonants: Evidence from Slovak* (2011), *Effects of Lexical Stress and Speech Rate on the Quantity and Quality of Slovak Vowels* (2010). It is clear that the focus of the author's research is pronunciation with special emphasis given to segmental and suprasegmental aspects.

Another publication by Beňuš and other authors under the title of *Výučba výslovnosti cudzích jazykov pomocou porovnávacej akustickej analýzy* (*Teaching Pronunciation of Foreign Languages with the Assistance of Acoustic Analysis*) presents a closer look on the problem [1]. In the first part of the book the authors focus on comparative analyses between the interference of three foreign languages (English, German and French) and the Slovak language. In each chapter vowels, consonants and their relations as well as the suprasegmental and prosodic features are discussed. The publication describes the use of acoustic analysis based on a software programme called PRAAT. This programme was designed to visualize the acoustic features of a language. A free downloadable software that helps learners to analyze their own spoken output. The book contains a practical component that describes how respondents were chosen (native and non-native speakers of each language) and recorded, how gathered data was analyzed, the orientation in the database together with the visualisation of several features, annotation of specific features and the extraction of quantitative data. As the authors have stated, the publication aims to support and further develop the competence and habits useful for study at university level.

The next Slovakian researcher interested in English pronunciation is M. Bilá. In the last decade she has published various articles connected to the specific areas within the field of phonetics and phonology. In her published research papers characteristics such as the following were: the analysis of silent pauses in an episode of the sitcom "Friends", cooperation of phonetic and syntactic features on the corpus of film dialogues in English, German and Slovak languages. The author also deals with the features characteristic to Slovak people namely: the perception of strongly reduced speech signals by percipients of two groups: Slovak speaking percipients and Slovak immigrants in

English-speaking countries. The author also focuses on the concepts of foreign accent, the perception and production of a second language as well as ideas connected to a virtual phonetic laboratory for teaching the English and German languages.

Special attention is given to her course book: *English Phonetics and Phonology for Slovak Students (2012)* as Bilá discusses the aim of the textbook: to provide Slovak learners of English with materials to assist in their production and perception of speech sounds, English vocalic and consonantal systems, the IPA symbols as well as the definitions of phonetic and phonological concepts [1]. Her table of contents makes it evident that this course book was designed for learners at the university level as it contains theoretical as well as practical sections where learners may exercise and implement their theoretical knowledge by solving various tasks. The book is a summary of knowledge about different pronunciation issues and practical tasks for listening and transcription purposes. These textbook materials provide a valuable asset for future Slovak teachers of English who when working out individual tasks during their university studies gain better understanding of the functioning of English pronunciation and so are expected to mirror the knowledge in their practical teaching in order to support their learners in becoming intelligible when pronouncing in the language.

Another researcher and author of numerous articles and books, Z. Kráľová, deals with comparisons between English and Slovak phonemic systems, sound interference, relationships of vocals, the segmental sound system and phonic competence in her publications. Quite a number of research papers have been published by her such as: *Personal Variables in Second Language Pronunciation Learning (2012)*, *The Correlation of Extraversion and L2 Pronunciation Quality (2011)*, *Slovak-English Vocalic Approximation (2011)*, *Correlation of Perceived English Phonic Competence and some Extra-lingual Variables (2010)*, *Television Programmes in the Acquisition of English Pronunciation (2010)*, *Factors of English Phonic Competence (2009)*, *Variance in Second Language Pronunciation Quality 2009*, *Teaching of Foreign Language Pronunciation (2009)*, *Age-related Theories of L2 Phonological Acquisition (2008)*, *Slovak-English Phonic Interference (word stress) (2007)*, *Individual Dynamics of Phonic Interference (2007)*, *Perceptual Evaluation of Slovak into English Phonic Interference (2007)*.

Kráľová's monograph *Slovensko-anglická zvuková interferencia – Slovak-English Sound Interference (2011)* discusses the research done in 1998. It is based on the pronunciation errors of Slovak learners studying the English Language as their second language [5]. The research was organised using the contrastive analysis of two languages English and Slovak. Using the CA method attention was paid to negative interference of segmental and suprasegmental features of Slovak (the first language, the interfering system) and English (the second language, the system interfered with). The group of respondents consisted of 60 learners who studied English for translation purposes and

were in their first year at university. All of the learners were tape recorded while speaking for 2.5 minutes. It was decided to have the learners speak freely rather than to read text in order to deliver a natural performance. These recordings were evaluated by 15 native speakers of English. The role of the native speakers was to listen to the recording only once and point out the dominant segmental and suprasegmental sounds of each learner considered either non idiomatic or wrongly/oddly pronounced. Following the initial classification of difficulties, the recordings were checked once again by two natives and one non-native speaker. The analysis found 27 different pronunciation errors. The author also discusses the way that she classified the errors and their division into two groups: first as the original cause of the error and second as the interference into the targeted language. The publication contains various graphs and tables that show the differentiation of errors, their description and explanations.

Another article that discusses the issue of Slovak learners gaining appropriate English pronunciation is titled *Teaching and Learning Pronunciation* [6]. The authors explain that not much attention is paid to the teaching of pronunciation at Slovak primary and secondary schools. One of the reasons why Slovak learners struggle with English pronunciation and why they do not see the importance of pronunciation as part of language acquisition is because Slovak teachers of English are challenged by the immense area of pronunciation. Teachers claim that they do not feel confident to teach this element of English language as they do not have much experience with it or knowledge regarding what is required. They are lacking knowledge of the theory and use of the suprasegmental features of English pronunciation. The authors of the article also point out the fact that Slovak learners focus more on grammar and vocabulary and care little about pronunciation. Mispronunciation then may lead to unintelligibility and teachers need to motivate and encourage learners to practise their spoken utterance. Further, the article looks at the communicative teaching approach, specifically its connection to pronunciation. There are two examples of methods and their use to assist with the teaching of pronunciation. Another aspect is the role of learners and their perception and production of phonemes during the English class. It is the teacher's responsibility to give learners the sort of tasks, activity or exercise that imitate and lead to the practise of the phonemes of the targeted language. In their article Z. Kráľová and R. Metruk also underline the role of feedback in foreign language teaching. With feedback it is important to set objectives and to focus mainly on intelligibility to finally assess the learners' oral production.

In the search for Slovak authors who deal in their surveys with aspects of English pronunciation we have come across few who have focused partially on specific components within this field of study. The researcher S. Pokrivčáková whose main area of study is bilingual education and adaptation of CLIL methodology when teaching the English language to Slovak learners has published an article with the title: *CALL and Teaching Pronunciation (2014)*. In the article she

discusses the real situation how important the teaching of English pronunciation is and the possibility of implementing computers into this process. Furthermore the author analyses “CAPT” (computer assisted pronunciation training) as a useful procedure to support learners in acquisition of intelligible pronunciation in the form of online software that is entertaining and motivating. The CAPT system is based on three steps where learners deal with input → output → feedback. Input is very important as it is the phase when each learner of a foreign language is exposed to the real (English) language in the form of many various types of model texts/discourses. Output is the production of the language and this is considered as the aim of the learning process when the learner practises the language and so improves his/her performance. Pokrivčáková also gives examples of different types of feedback that are necessary for the learner to help him/her recognize possible problems that occur in the oral output. The article also works as a practical guide for Slovak teachers who can find a list with many different activities, materials, online software programmes that support the learners in their uptake and practice of English pronunciation.

The next author, E. Reid, focuses her research field mainly on intercultural competences within the English language teaching process published in 2014 in an article entitled *Internet Pronunciation Activities as an Attractive Way of Teaching Pronunciation* [8]. In the beginning she points out that English pronunciation is a problematic issue within the educational environment of Slovak learners as well as in other countries where the language is taught as a foreign language. The article also stresses that it is very important to focus on pronunciation when teaching English language as early as possible. In this regard for learners it is important to be exposed to authentic audio materials and at the same time to practice the oral output while guided with correct pronunciation and teacher’s feedback. The author sees the solution for better learning of pronunciation in internet activities and various quizzes. The content of the article also recommends the most suitable teaching techniques for teachers and for attractive and efficient learning of pronunciation. Reid gives examples of websites, online resources and depicts activities available for “drilling” technique. Another technique that is included in the article is “ear training” based on hearing and identification of sounds. For this technique examples are given which may be adapted to English classes at elementary school level.

The last author discussed in this paper, J. Datko, focuses his research mainly in the field of using multimedia during the English language teaching process. In 2013 he published an article with the title: *An Inspection of High School EFL Teachers’ Views on Their Confidence in Teaching Correct English Pronunciation* [3]. In the introduction the article discusses the theoretical view of how future teachers of English study and practice different aspects of English pronunciation for their own self-improvement during their university programmes. It is uncanny that during their studies they have very little or no experience with how to teach, explain or practice pronunciation skills with their

learners. In this regard the author conducted research with eleven Slovak secondary school teachers of English who had been interviewed to answer a question about their views regarding their confidence when teaching correct English pronunciation. The semi-structured interview included three codes to be used according to how respondents expressed their opinions about confidence in their teaching skills. The results revealed that more than a half of interviewed teachers were confident in the way that they taught English pronunciation. The second code indicated that three respondents were less confident teaching English pronunciation than other skills. The last group included two teachers who claimed that they were not always fully confident when teaching English pronunciation. Datko concludes that based on discussions with teachers who felt less confident in teaching English pronunciation they see their uncertainty, lack of confidence in the insufficient methodological and pedagogical preparation for teaching this crucial aspect of English language. The author suggests further investigation of syllabi at universities to ascertain whether more options, lessons, courses on how to teach English pronunciation are offered.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of publications of individual Slovak researchers makes it clear that English pronunciation has recently been studied in a broader way which has brought valuable insights into the process of how the English and Slovak languages mutually work/affect each other as well as the findings which minister to both teachers and learners that they may understand the acquisition of this language feature and further improve the learning of this foreign language.

It is evident that each scholar focused on a specific aspect of the “educational diagram” that influences Slovak learners when learning and practicing English pronunciation. It can be stated that Beňuš is oriented toward the segmental and suprasegmental features of the Slovak language and its natural action and influence on a learner and so subsequently the manner in which it relates to/interferes with the acquisition of English pronunciation. Bilá also discusses suprasegmental features in her articles, the influence of foreign accent on Slovak learners and also supplies a manual for future teachers, as the aspect of textbook plays an important role. Kráľová primarily looks at the learner himself/herself whereas the majority of her publications search deeper into the mutual phonic interference of English and Slovak language. Furthermore, she looks at learners’ improper oral output – pronunciation errors. Her other publication with Metruk focuses on a teacher who is involved in English pronunciation as can be found in the diagram above, and his/her needs for better teaching and appropriate feedback for learners. Similarly, Datko discusses the issue of teachers and their complicated situation within the educational environment; their lack of methodological and practical experience in the practice of teaching English pronunciation appropriately and the resulting lack of self-confidence. Pokrivčáková and Reid both give examples of different tasks that could be useful



when dealing with English pronunciation practice for both learners and teachers needs. Their mentioned examples support online activities with important authentic English language input.

The Slovak researchers have analyzed English pronunciation for Slovak learners from different angles. The aspects such as learner and teacher have been surveyed more deeply yet there are still features that play crucial role and require further investigation. The aspect of textbooks and their influence on English pronunciation acquisition has only slightly been observed. Very few researchers have really focused on this area and the didactics of English pronunciation that should be the next steps.

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