Teaching and assessing English pronunciation in the communicative classroom

- A qualitative study about teaching and assessing English pronunciation as part of oral skills in the ninth grade in Sweden

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Abstract

This study investigates how a group of English teachers in Sweden teach and assess pronunciation to ninth graders as a part of oral skills. The method applied in the study is qualitative semi-structured interviews with six teachers from different cities and schools in Sweden. The results show that teaching English pronunciation is included in different speaking and listening contexts and is not taught separately. However, the teachers do formative pronunciation assessments in almost every lesson, but summative assessment is rarely given in each semester. This case study views how the participants teach English pronunciation to ninth graders and concludes that communicative language teaching methods have an overwhelming role in the teaching of pronunciation, as pronunciation is included in other language skills and happens mostly without direct focus, which is typical in a communicative approach.

Keywords: pronunciation, oral skills, oral proficiency, speaking, communication, communicative classroom, English, ninth grade
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### 1 Introduction

Teaching English mostly utilises communicative methods in the Western world (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) and the curriculum in Sweden highlights an overall communicative competence (Otterstedt, 2016). Intelligible pronunciation is crucial for successful oral communication, and without being able to pronounce the sounds of language, we would not be understood (Derwing & Munro, 2011).

It is stated in the curriculum by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2012a) that one part of the core content of speaking is “to clarify, vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions”. However, pronunciation is not mentioned in the knowledge requirements of the curriculum, but it is stated that “in oral and written production, students can express themselves in relatively varied ways, clearly and coherently” (Skolverket, 2012a, p. 38) for the highest grade. Different possibilities to interpret the ideal pronunciation (Levis 2005) and unclear knowledge requirements make it challenging for teachers to know how they should teach and assess English pronunciation.

The curriculum’s comment material (support material for the curriculum) states that one goal of teaching is to develop students’ pronunciation as part of oral communication and that it is important to support students working to improve their pronunciation skills (Skolverket 2012b). In the communicative approach, it is typical to include pronunciation in different speaking and listening contexts and not to isolate it (Otterstedt, 2016). However, the communicative approach has been criticised since it does not focus sufficiently on pronunciation (Janczukowicz, 2014). In any case, it is difficult to teach pronunciation to all individuals, as students’ levels of English pronunciation vary widely, and students can also have different mother tongues, which might affect how teachers work with pronunciation (Sylvén, 2013).

Understanding how English teachers work with pronunciation gives me the knowledge to be successful in my future as an English teacher. For teachers of ninth grade, it is essential to find effective strategies to help students reach a high level of English pronunciation as it becomes more challenging for students to learn proper pronunciation as they age (Laberg, 2000), and requirements for oral skills are higher in upper secondary school. Teachers need to be conscious of different methods of teaching...
pronunciation and providing constructive feedback so that students’ oral skills develop in a positive direction; students should become self-aware so that they make fewer mistakes, which can lead to conversation breakdown. Besides its importance, there is a lack of research in how English pronunciation is taught in Sweden. This case study can be related to that context and give a view for possible further research, which can help to discover more effective teaching and assessing methods.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how English teachers work with pronunciation in developing ninth-graders’ oral skills and what pedagogical methods they have. Additionally, this study aims to discover whether English pronunciation is assessed formatively and summatively in the ninth grade, and in what manner. These are the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical methods do teachers have in teaching English pronunciation as part of oral skills in the ninth grade?

2. How are formative and summative assessments applied in the teaching of English pronunciation in the ninth grade?

2 Background

There has been a great deal of research into English pronunciation, but there is an apparent lack of study relating to how it is taught and assessed in secondary schools in Sweden. However, there is research about teaching English pronunciation in schools in several European countries where English is not the first language. Pronunciation teaching methods have also been studied at length, and there is extensive theoretical literature on English pronunciation and phonology. Differences between English and Swedish pronunciation are also extensively studied.
2.1 English pronunciation for Swedish speakers

English is widely used in Sweden, as many Swedes either speak or hear English almost every day, leading to the high input of English in Swedish society (Otterstedt, 2016). This, in turn, helps with English pronunciation by listening and imitating, which is why Swedes are generally good at English pronunciation (Otterstedt, 2016). There are quite a few sounds that are similar both in Swedish and English, but there are also some differences which require practise, and these differences make it important to teach English pronunciation (Otterstedt, 2016).

Each language has specific sounds, and if there are sounds in English that are not in the learner’s mother tongue, it can be hard for a learner to pronounce them (Gut, 2009). That is why it is useful for both the language teacher and the learner to understand the major concepts of English pronunciation (Low, 2015). For example, if a language learner knows the articulation position of different sounds and the International Phonetic Alphabet of English (IPA), which includes all English sounds, it can be easier to pronounce difficult sounds and words (Low, 2015).

The Swedish and English phonological systems are closely related, so it is easier for Swedish people to learn English pronunciation. Most sounds are similar in both languages, but there are also many different sounds that cause articulation positions to vary between them. There are more “pure” vowels in Swedish than in English, which means that Swedes do not have problems with most of the vowel sounds in English, though they still have some difficulty with minimal pairs such as ship / sheep or bed / bad (Shoebottom, 2011).

The situation is different with consonants because English has more consonants than Swedish. For example, the consonants /ʃ, ʒ/ (as in church and judge) do not exist in the Swedish language and are problematic for many Swedes (Rönnerdal & Johansson, 2005). In addition, /θ, ð/ (like breath and breathe) can be complicated for Swedes to pronounce since there are no similar consonants in the Swedish phonology (Rönnerdal & Johansson, 2005).
2.2 Teaching and assessing pronunciation in the communicative classroom

English lessons are more interactive today because the communicative approach, which highlights all-round communicative skills and includes many different teaching methods, became the primary approach in the Western world in the 1970s (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). With this approach came a “renewed urgency to the teaching of pronunciation” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005, p. 7), since without proper pronunciation, second-language learners have trouble being understood. The communicative approach includes several different theories and language teaching methods; although teachers follow this approach, there can be significant differences between their teaching methods (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). Two examples of these methods are content- and task-based methods. These methods connect language learning to a context and situation (Burns & Richards, 2012). An example of the task-based method is a situation where students practice what to say and how to behave in a specific context, for example in a job interview (Richards & Rodgers, 2003).

Although communicative language teaching focuses on four communicative skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading comprehension), it is important to teach other parts of language such as pronunciation and phonology (Janczukowicz, 2014). It is possible to teach pronunciation by using many different methods, but today, the two most important approaches to teaching pronunciation are “an intuitive-imitative approach and an analytic-linguistic approach” (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005, p. 2). The intuitive-imitative approach is based on the learner’s ability to learn pronunciation by listening to the target language and mimicking it without getting any extensive information. This approach is mostly learning by doing, but an analytic-linguistic approach instead uses information of phonetics and phonology and is more analytical. It focuses more on how language and pronunciation work, such as how different sounds are produced (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). These two approaches to teaching pronunciation are used in modern language teaching, which is based on the communicative approach.

It seems more efficient to connect pronunciation to other language skills and not to isolate it (Otterstedt, 2016). This type of comprehensive teaching could include, for example, short, content-specific dialogues from which the teacher could isolate a
difficult sound and allow students extra time to practise. There are also many other activities and games that would make this possible. Corrective feedback is also a regular way for teachers to engage with pronunciation (Couper, 2015).

One frequent topic of discussion in teaching pronunciation is to decide what would be the appropriate “standard” goal and model. Traditionally, it has been either the General American (GA) or the British English Received pronunciation (RP), but today, either international or local varieties of English seem to be more appropriate. Nevertheless, “the standard for English as an International Language (EIL) is intelligibility rather than native-like pronunciation” (Brinton, 2012, p. 251).

Intuition and ideology have always been important in determining how pronunciation should sound. There are two primary goals of foreign language pronunciation, the first is the “nativeness principle”, which “holds that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language” (Levis, 2005, p. 370). The idea of native-like pronunciation was more popular previously, but today it is less popular because it can be unrealistic for both teacher and learner to reach that level, even in advanced EFL contexts, as in Scandinavian countries (Levis, 2005).

Age affects language learning, especially skills that require an automatic response. Speech production is a secondary skill, and age plays an important role even before adulthood in how well language learners can learn pronunciation (Ladberg, 2000). For instance, a 13-year-old finds it more comfortable to learn pronunciation and fluent speaking than a 16-year-old (Ladberg, 2000). There are also other language skills that require an automatic response, like some grammar rules, but pronunciation seems to be most dependent on age (Ladberg, 2000). Furthermore, motivation, mother tongue, and pronunciation training are important factors, but age is still the dominant factor (Levis, 2005).

The second most common goal of pronunciation is the “intelligibility principle”, which can be divided into local and global intelligibility (Munro & Derwing, 2015), meaning that learners’ speaking has to be understandable (Levis, 2005). It holds that oral communication can be fluent even if the speaker’s foreign accent shows up while speaking English (Levis, 2005). Earlier research has focused a lot on different accents and native-like pronunciation, but not on intelligibility, which has become a common
goal and is the most crucial element for successful oral communication. There is a lack of information about the best teaching methods for achieving intelligible pronunciation. In addition, there is no information about whether the phonological structure is worth teaching, as the most effective techniques of teaching pronunciation in the classroom are not researched (Derwing & Munro, 2011).

There are many tests and methods to assess pronunciation like other language skills. A frequent assessment is a diagnostic evaluation that is often used to screen learners and check whether they can complete a particular task. A diagnostic test can also be used to monitor a learner’s language proficiency (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). One of the most common ways to diagnostically evaluate pronunciation in production tasks is letting learners read a text out loud or giving them a free speech task where they talk about familiar topics such as their hobbies or hometown (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). There are also possibilities for the learner to self-monitor and get feedback from their peers and the teacher. For the teacher, it is important to find the best formative assessment to evaluate students’ learning and provide constructive feedback to help students understand how they could improve their learning (Lindström et al., 2013). Summative assessments, on the other hand, focus on how well students have learnt and how they have shown their skills in relation to the expectations of a course (Lindström et al., 2013). Often, assessing pronunciation is integrated into speaking tasks and is graded as part of them. In addition, assessing pronunciation is closely related to its teaching, and many tasks can be utilised both for teaching and assessing (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005).

Pronunciation is also possible to assess impressionistically, but is not an effective method if there are many students in a classroom. Another common assessment method involves recording learners’ speech and then assessing it. Alternatively, learners can repeat the targeted sounds they hear from a tape or listen to different sounds and try to recognise them. It can be assumed that learners have difficulty producing sounds they cannot hear (Brinton, 2012). For the teacher, it is important to find a proper way of providing feedback so that the classroom climate stays healthy and students are not afraid to speak English (Brinton, 2012).

The teacher should have appropriate expectations of students’ pronunciation when teaching in secondary school, as there are certain requirements to be able to discuss
more complex ideas. It should always be required that learners pronounce all phonemes of English so that there is no risk of misunderstanding (Janczukowicz, 2014). Furthermore, teaching the theoretical aspects of pronunciation is important. Some students can learn the correct pronunciation by mimicking native speakers, but most need to get at least some basic theoretical knowledge about pronunciation, especially older students (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 2000).

2.3 English pronunciation teaching in Europe

There is a study about English pronunciation teaching in seven European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Macedonia, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland) that was done by Henderson et al. (2015). The study was based on a survey of 640 teachers who taught 6- to 18-year-old students. In addition, some follow-up interviews were conducted with ten teachers from France.

The results of the study include, among other things, the amount of time spent teaching English pronunciation, as well as teachers’ instruction and assessment methods. “The majority of respondents (79%) indicated that they devote up to a quarter of their weekly teaching time to teaching pronunciation” (Henderson et al., 2015, p. 270). The most typical teaching methods were communicative, but it was also normal to teach phonetic symbols, or at least present them for recognition. The teachers usually taught symbols that do not exist in the learners’ mother tongue or those that are difficult. Furthermore, it was more common to teach symbols to older rather than younger students (Henderson et al., 2015).

There were differences in how the teachers assessed English pronunciation, but most of them provided several tasks for students, which were evaluated. There was also some variance when they assessed pronunciation, but it was most common to assess it during the course (49%) and almost as common at the end of the course (Henderson et al., 2015). The table below shows that pronunciation was assessed mostly during speaking tasks: oral performances, reading out loud, and different types of oral exams. However, listening comprehension was the second most used task, and around 20% of the teachers assessed written work at least once in each course. There were also other assessment methods that were not categorised, but those had a minor role.
Table 1 Tasks used in the assessment of pronunciation skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Diagnostic (n=525)</th>
<th>Formative (n=535)</th>
<th>Evaluative (n=535)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral performances</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading aloud</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening comprehension</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral exams in pairs</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual oral exams</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written work</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Henderson et al., 2015, p. 275.

In fact, the results of Henderson et al.’s (2015) research are compared to the present study, as the contents are closely related to each other. The methods for teaching and assessing pronunciation are compared in order to better understand the results and see possible similarities and differences.

3 Method and material

In this section, the choice of method and its implementation into the study are presented. There is also a discussion considering the ethical aspects of the research and an explanation of the methodology. The limitations of the study are also analysed.

3.1 Method

The study adopts a qualitative approach to gathering the data, and semi-structured interviews were the chosen method. In semi-structured interviews, it is possible to get more in-depth answers than in quantitative studies, and that is the main reason this approach was chosen. There is also a possibility to ask follow-up questions in semi-structured interviews, whereas in a quantitative study, it is not usually possible (Bryman, 2016). One other advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the questions do not have to be as specific as in a structured interview. Semi-structured interview questions, however, are clearer and easier to analyse than unstructured interviews, which might include just one question (Bryman, 2016).

Lagerholm (2010) writes that qualitative methods are preferred when the research topic is complex. Teaching and assessing pronunciation as part of oral skills is a complex topic, as they are mostly integrated into other language skills and implemented without
focusing on them. Internal validity, a connection between a researcher’s findings and ideas that develop (Bryman, 2016), is higher because of the chosen method, as it created more comprehensive ideas than a quantitative method would have.

3.1.1 Implementation

A request to interview teachers for the candidate thesis was posted in different Facebook groups for language teachers and teacher students in Sweden. Six teachers answered the request and were interviewed. The interviews were implemented using the video call functions on FaceTime and Skype, which saved travel costs as the interviews were conducted remotely. The teachers were given the interview questions (see Appendix A) just before the interviews, giving them time to formulate some responses before the interviews began. If the teachers had a mother tongue other than Swedish, they were interviewed in English. During the interviews, all the questions and themes were read out loud, and some follow-up questions were asked. For example, teachers were asked how they view the role of pronunciation as part of oral skills and whether they have any diagnostic tests of pronunciation. There were also other follow-up questions that were asked to get more comprehensive answers, but these questions varied slightly among each interview. There was some flexibility, which is important when conducting semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2016).

The interview guide consisted of three themes: definition of oral skills, how English pronunciation is taught, and how English pronunciation is assessed. The first theme helped to get a feel for how teachers think about oral skills and provided clarity for the teachers as to what the study would be about. That theme also helped to analyse the results. The last two themes were closely connected to the research questions.

3.2 Material

3.2.1 Participants

Six teachers (two males, four females) were interviewed, and the interviews lasted from 22 to 35 minutes. All participants were from different schools and cities in Sweden. They ranged in age from 30 to 60 years old. Each teacher was qualified to teach English at the ninth-grade level, each had taught at least one year of ninth-grade English in
Sweden, and all were teaching English to ninth-graders at the time of the interviews. The most experienced teacher had been teaching for 22 years. All the interviewees had completed their teacher education in Sweden and they spoke fluent Swedish. One teacher (T6) was a native English speaker, and one (T3) had a mother tongue other than Swedish or English. The rest of the teachers had Swedish as a mother tongue. T3 and T6 were interviewed in English, but the other interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the answers are translated into English.

3.2.2 Ethical aspects

According to Bryman (2016), it is essential that participating in research is not detrimental to the participants in any way. Participants were protected in this study, as researchers followed The Swedish Research Council’s (TSRC 2002) ethical principles.

All the teachers consented to recording the interviews and to the use of the material for this project. The participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to write a candidate thesis, and that it was voluntary to participate. Before starting the interviews, the participants were asked if it was okay to be recorded and it was also mentioned that they could stop the interview whenever they want. After the interviews, the participants were asked again whether they would allow the interviews to be used as material for the study. The participants’ anonymity was guaranteed by not publishing any information that would make it possible to recognise them.

3.3 Problems and limitations

Bryman (2016) writes that a common problem of qualitative studies is external validity because of the low number of participants, and that holds true for this study. A quantitative method would have made it easier to reach more participants, and the study would be more generalisable. However, six interviews were seen to be an adequate amount for a candidate thesis. If there had been more time for the study, it would have been possible to do more interviews or use a mixed method. A questionnaire would have been prepared and sent to a larger number of teachers after the interviews.

Another benefit of a quantitative method would have been the greater possibility of repeating the study, which is one of the main aspects of external reliability (Bryman,
This is often a problem in qualitative interviews, as it is impossible to freeze the social settings and have the same interview situation twice (Bryman, 2016). By using the same interview guide and preparing to ask the same follow-up questions, it would be possible to reach basically the same results, but external reliability is a limitation of the chosen method.

One limitation in the study is that it is not possible to know what really happened in the classroom, since no classroom observations were done. It cannot be known how accurate the teachers’ responses were compared to what they really taught and assessed in the classroom.

4 Results and analysis

4.1 Definition of oral skills and the role of pronunciation in oral skills

There were similarities in the teachers’ answers, as they mostly defined oral skills as an ability to express thoughts and ideas in different oral situations.

How students can express themselves. How they can participate in the conversation. (T2. My translation)

Teachers 2 and 3 basically had similar answers to the question, highlighting an ability to interact and participate in the conversation. T4 and T5 emphasised the same skills, but also raised a couple other points of view, such as finding different strategies to express themselves.

Oral skills are an ability to express themselves and communicate and interact with others. To be understood. At the more advanced level, it is fluency and strategies to express themselves. (T5. My translation)

T6 said that oral skills mean what is spoken in different situations and how.

I think it is everything that is said, but also all intonations that are used. It is not only what is said. It is the word that is said, but that is only a small part. It is also
how to put stress on words and how to adapt what is said to different situations.
(T6. My translation)

Overall, the teachers highlighted being understood when they defined what oral skills mean and include, but other aspects such as interaction in different situations were also mentioned. T1 mentioned that being able to have spontaneous, unexpected conversations is essential in showing how developed your oral skills are.

What is very interesting is spontaneous conversation and interaction. It is possible to be interrupted and get a question and the discussion goes in an unexpected way. And that is the sleight of hand that characterises a good quality of oral skills. (T1. My translation)

When asked a supplementary question about how they view the role of pronunciation as part of oral skills, the teachers mostly said that it plays a role, but is not everything; they wanted to highlight that there are other important aspects as well.

It is important but not essential. I am old enough and I have travelled a lot in different areas in different regions. You will always come across your oral knowledge of English with other accents and pronunciations. (T3)

T4 and T6 also thought that pronunciation is important and essential in communication, but said they do not focus much on pronunciation. T5 also talked about being understood and about different accents.

It is not required for students to speak with a specific accent such as American or British. It is more about the difficulties of pronunciation that need to be improved. It is not something that is given much effort. (T5. My translation)

T2 talked about the importance of being understood as well, but she also pointed out students’ self-confidence in relation to their pronunciation. In addition, she mentioned how different backgrounds could affect people’s dialects and expectations of their dialect.

I think it is important for improving students’ self-confidence. But it is also important when we speak Swedish and then someone comes and speaks completely error-free Swedish and says, for instance, “I am from Bristol”. Then
people think, *wow, okay*. That feels almost strange. So many people’s backgrounds show in their dialects. I think it is charming and nice. (T2. My translation)

As mentioned before, being understood was most important to all the teachers, and pronunciation was not indicated until they were asked how they view the role of pronunciation in oral skills. The teachers basically had similar thoughts about oral skills and the role of pronunciation, but they mentioned different aspects they view as important that could be related to their own experiences. These answers show that intelligibility is the keyword for oral skills and pronunciation, and if students speak English that is intelligible, then it is not important to focus on pronunciation.

4.2 How English pronunciation is taught as a part of oral skills in the ninth grade

The teachers answered that pronunciation is included in different speaking and listening tasks in their classrooms, but they did not provide any tasks that focus only on pronunciation. Pronunciation is not part of the lesson plans; most often, it is included in the content, but not taught separately. Sometimes, however, the teachers want to pay more attention to teaching it in their lessons.

Pronunciation is included in speaking and maybe even listening comprehension. So they get a lot of impressions of different pronunciations. (T5. My translation)

T3 gave one example of a speaking task, which the other teachers could also use according to their answers. Not all the teachers ask their students to record their voices, but everybody requires students to discuss different topics together.

They work in pairs and choose one question about a city. It could be a city where they would like to live in the future or something like that. So, every pair of students choose a topic and then they will record it in their iPhones and they email their recordings to me. So, I get their performance and I will give feedback. (T3)
All the teachers explained that pronunciation is included in speaking and listening skills. That was the most common answer, but T4 said that she also wants her students to understand how voice is produced.

It is required to take up things and try to separate voice and details. I think that is important. Separate things. Take away misunderstandings. (T4. My translation)

The teachers do not teach pronunciation separately, and they did not provide any tasks that focus only on it. However, in some exercises pronunciation plays an important role, as the teachers try to make their students notice difficult sounds and learn how to pronounce them.

When we go through a text, I always have classical read-aloud exercises together with the class. Then I explain if there is a sound that does not exist in Swedish. Then I talk about that sound and explain what happens in the tongue, teeth, or lips so that they feel what happens and what makes the sound. (T2. My translation)

T2 mentioned dental fricatives (/θ/ and /ð/), which do not exist in Swedish, and she said that sometimes she uses the IPA as a tool to help students pronounce certain words and sounds. None of the teachers has any tests on the IPA, but a few teachers go through phonetic symbols to help students pronounce difficult words and sounds. All the teachers use the IPA at least a little to specify some challenging sounds, with the exception of T5 and T6, who do not use it at all.

The teachers said that the problems of pronunciation they usually work with are sounds that do not exist in the Swedish language.

Most students have a background in Swedish, but there are other language backgrounds as well. The fricative $S$ is naturally a problem for many Swedes because it does not exist in Swedish. (T1. My translation)

T1 also said that affricates /tf/ and /dz/ are problematic in certain words such as *jumper* and *George*. T4 also used the word *George* to illustrate that dental fricatives can be hard to pronounce. T6 mentioned that she uses minimal pairs to help students learn
individual sounds. If the teachers did not give any specific sounds that are problematic for Swedes, they said that they work with difficulties that are typical for Swedes.

Sometimes they rush and they are not relaxed. They start using Swedish pronunciation when they speak English. (T3)

When it comes to helping students with pronunciation, the teachers said they make students speak more, but that they also help them pronounce difficult words and give feedback on pronunciation. It was also mentioned that the classroom environment has to be comfortable and that students need confidence to speak English.

It is a lot of practice. Make sure that they are confident, and I mean it is really a lot of creating a safe environment. (T6)

The teachers’ main goal is to get students to pronounce even the most difficult words understandably, so that everybody who speaks English can understand them, not only those with the same mother tongue. The following answer gives an accurate presentation of English pronunciation goals for ninth graders.

The basic goal is that the students should manage different situations and become understood if they have to speak English with someone who does not speak Swedish—so that there is no chance to get help from their mother tongue to express themselves. It is still hard to isolate pronunciation. (T5. My translation)

It was also mentioned that one goal is to get students to speak fluent English and be comfortable with speech and pronunciation.

The teachers gave varied responses when asked what they think is the most important part of teaching English pronunciation. Their perceptions were different, but no new aspects came up, and the teachers repeated their previous answers. However, T2 gave an example of a task she did not mention before and also summarised her thoughts that can relate to the other teachers:

I think the most important thing is to give a lot of practice and to trust that the students understand it. For instance, we write in a notebook about pronunciation and phonetics. Then one of my colleagues asked whether this was too difficult. I
said no why would it be? It is perhaps easier when the students get to know what happens and how that feels. (T2. My translation)

Different pedagogical methods were mentioned in the responses, which mostly included examples of different speaking and listening tasks. These are oral presentations, interactive tasks, reading texts aloud, and listening comprehension. Concentrating on teaching pronunciation happens when the teachers pick up a difficult word or sound that is challenging for students. That can happen if the teachers notice that students are struggling or if they know beforehand that a certain sound or word is challenging. All the teachers pay attention to difficult sounds in English, and these sounds are mostly those that do not exist in the students’ mother tongue. By working with these problems, it is common to use analytical methods and explain how to pronounce these sounds by showing phonetic symbols and explaining the articulation position. Nevertheless, listening and imitation are also frequent methods in helping students pronounce the difficult sounds correctly.

4.3 Formative and summative assessments of pronunciation in the ninth grade

Regarding how pronunciation is assessed, answers were closely related to teaching methods. The teaching of pronunciation is not included in the teachers’ lesson or semester plans, as is often the case with assessing pronunciation. Especially formative assessment happens continuously and impressionistically in almost every lesson, without teachers planning how to give the assessment. However, formative feedback is sometimes planned in different speaking tasks.

Sometimes they have to talk to each other during a certain time, 15 minutes, and then I go around and listen to them and then I correct their errors. That is number one. Two: They have to send me a sound file for me to listen, and then they get feedback. (T3)

Giving formative assessments varies from method to method, but the most common is to mention the students’ mistakes, either individually or with the whole class. The teachers sometimes go over pronunciation errors in front of the class instead of addressing them immediately with individual students. It is also typical to make a
formative assessment by giving written feedback for students; T6 is the only teacher who does not provide any written feedback on students’ pronunciation. Nevertheless, she assesses students regularly.

Every lesson I assess them. I constantly evaluate students’ pronunciation. (T6)

Later, she said that feedback is mostly positive because

…pronunciation is very sensitive. It is difficult to give negative feedback without affecting the environment. It is easier to give positive feedback. (T6)

T1 does a formative assessment in many ways, and making assessments is often closely related to his teaching, as he explains what problems students have and how they can improve their pronunciation.

How to pronounce the word. How it sounds. But also, from the mouth and throat, and what forms are activated when a word is produced. (T1. My translation)

T2 and T3 also do formative assessments in many ways, and they want their students to record their speech, after which they provide feedback, including pronunciation. The other three teachers (T4–T6) mentioned that formative assessments are something that happen constantly, but they did not mention any specific exercises for making them, as they are often integrated with summative assessments. T4 described that formatively assessing is

…forward-looking. I do it all the time. Then it is so that I have a summative part as well. (T4. My translation)

All the teachers include pronunciation in oral skills when they do a summative assessment, but they do not assess pronunciation separately. None of the teachers grades pronunciation from F to A, and they do not have any matrices where pronunciation is separated. However, it affects oral assessments. T5’s answer presents how all the teachers assess pronunciation summatively.

Somehow, assessing is usually a combination of both formative and summative assessments. A task can become summative but have a formative direction
towards the next task. Summative assessing also happens sometimes when we have worked with tasks where pronunciation is naturally included. If we think about a presentation, then it is obvious that pronunciation is part of it and shows how the presentation went. (T5. My translation)

It was asked as a supplementary question whether the teachers give a diagnostic test of oral skills and pronunciation at the beginning of the semester. T1 and T4 were the only teachers who used one.

I like to use old national tests at the beginning of the semester. (T4. My translation)

T4 also mentioned that oral skills are a part of that test, and pronunciation falls under that category.

All the teachers assess pronunciation formatively at least once a week. Summative assessment occurs only a few times a year, sometimes only once per semester.

All the grading criteria [are assessed] once a semester. Then they get an assessment of them. I assess the students and take in information all the time. (T2. My translation)

The formative assessing of pronunciation happens continuously, almost every lesson. The teachers do this in a few different ways as they give both written and oral feedback for all students, and they give the students several different tasks for this purpose. However, an overwhelming method of providing formative assessment is to give oral feedback during the lessons when the teachers notice that students are struggling with pronunciation or when they mispronounce some words.

When asked if they would like to add something regarding teaching or assessing pronunciation, the teachers gave some ideas that would contribute to further investigation but do not relate to this study. However, a couple of aspects came up that are helpful in understanding the answers better.
I think that people usually learn through this imitative language learning. It is really important, and sometimes we teachers forget how important it is for students to listen to native speakers. (T3)

She said that these native speakers could be from all over the world, not just the United States or Britain.

T6 mentioned that there is not a clear definition in the knowledge requirements about how students’ pronunciation should sound, and she explained that sometimes even native speakers have an accent that makes them hard to understand. She said Skolverket does not provide enough information about this topic, and she has discussed it with other English teachers. It is still unclear, however, how pronunciation and different accents should affect oral skills assessments.

T1 said that it should be accepted that there are different accents when students speak English and that it gets harder to learn pronunciation as they get older.

4.4 Analysis

The aim was to investigate how the teaching and assessing of English pronunciation are applied and what methods teachers utilise with their ninth-grade students. The results of the study show that communicative methods play a crucial role in the teaching of English pronunciation. Pronunciation is taught mostly by giving different speaking and listening tasks where the main purpose is to improve students’ communicative skills, especially oral skills. It is not taught separately because Swedes are good at English pronunciation and it seems to be more effective to integrate it into different oral tasks such as presentations, read-aloud exercises, and interactions (Otterstedt, 2016).

Integrating pronunciation into other language skills is typical in the communicative approach; it is not common to isolate it (Janczukowicz, 2014). In addition, listening to native speakers from diverse sources is one of the most common tasks to improve pronunciation and is a widely recognised method of teaching it in the intuitive-imitative approach (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). The teachers did not mention pronunciation when they defined oral skills and what they include. When asked about the role of pronunciation in oral skills, the teachers highlighted the importance of being
understood. These views were reflected in the teaching methods, which did not concentrate much on pronunciation.

Communicative methods, which include a lot of listening and speaking, can be overwhelming in teaching pronunciation. Analytic-linguistic methods, for example teaching articulation position and phonetic symbols (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005), are also used by all the teachers, although how often they are used varies greatly. In addition, intuitive-imitative methods, such as listening and repeating the target sounds and words, are also applied (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). All the teachers utilise their knowledge of students’ mother tongues, and all of them said that they work with problems of certain English pronunciations that are commonly challenging for Swedish speakers. Typically, the sounds that do not exist in the learners’ mother tongue are challenging to learn (Gut, 2009), and the teachers know that. In teaching pronunciation, all the teachers focused on problems that stem from differences between the students’ mother tongue and English. The teachers pay attention to all individual students’ needs and try to make students conscious of how difficult sounds are pronounced. That is important for a language learner because the knowledge of different pronunciation concepts helps to produce the targeted sounds (Low, 2015).

All the teachers aim to get their students’ pronunciation to a globally intelligible level, which means that people who have different mother tongues should be able to understand them (Munro & Derwing, 2015). Janczukowicz (2014) writes that teachers in secondary school should expect their students to be able to pronounce all phonemes, and the teachers in this study have the same expectations, as they correct their students if they pronounce English in the Swedish way or if they mispronounce certain words. However, none of the teachers expects their students to have native-like pronunciation because it is not mentioned in the knowledge requirements (Skolverket, 2012a), and it would not be realistic for all students, as age affects language learning, especially pronunciation (Ladberg, 2000). Students are usually 15 years old when they enter ninth grade, so it has already become more difficult for them to learn native-like pronunciation (Ladberg, 2000).

Derwing and Munro (2011) write that there is a lack of research on the best way to teach pronunciation, and it is not clear whether phonology and phonetics are useful in teaching when the goal is to improve pronunciation. Most teachers do not focus much
on these aspects, and when asked if they utilise the IPA in their teaching, two teachers said they do not teach it at all. In Henderson et al. (2015), it was more common to use the IPA when teaching pronunciation. However, in the present study and Henderson et al. (2015), it was normal to teach the phonetic symbols that do not exist in the students’ mother tongue. In this study, four teachers teach certain phonetic symbols when they notice that students have problems with those sounds (e.g., dental and palato-alveolar fricatives). All the teachers use intuitive-imitative methods of teaching pronunciation, but some analytical aspects, such as teaching the articulation position of difficult individual sounds, are also applied. Dalton and Seidlohofer (2000) write that it is important to teach theoretical aspects of pronunciation, but this was not often mentioned in the interviews in this study.

Communicative methods of teaching English are dominant in Sweden (Otterstedt, 2016) and also in the Henderson et al. (2015) study. It is written in the Swedish curriculum that the primary goal is to improve all-around communicative skills (Skolverket, 2012a), which was corroborated by the teachers when they described how they teach English pronunciation. However, assessing pronunciation is commonly connected to teaching (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005), and that also came up when teachers were asked how they make assessments.

Although pronunciation is a secondary skill (Ladberg, 2000) and the teachers do not focus much on teaching it, they do regular formative assessments of pronunciation at least once a week. It is stated in the comment material for the curriculum that students should get support if they have any problems with pronunciation, which can make it difficult for them to be understood (Skolverket, 2012b). That can affect why the teachers assess pronunciation so often, but the comment material is only a support for teachers, not an official document like the curriculum that must be followed.

Some teachers have many ways of formatively assessing pronunciation, and they do so when students have any type of oral task. Not all teachers give written feedback on pronunciation, as they find it enough to give oral feedback for the whole class or individually with students. This is to create and maintain a comfortable classroom environment where the students are encouraged to be active rather than being fearful of making mistakes. This is the purpose of communicative language teaching and is also important in teaching English pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005).
Feedback on pronunciation can be a sensitive subject for students, and that is why not all the teachers provide written feedback, but rather oral feedback to the whole class.

The teachers do not assess pronunciation separately when they do a summative assessment because it is not mentioned in the curriculum’s knowledge requirements, and it is stated that students should speak intelligibly. “In oral production, students can express themselves in relatively varied ways, clearly and coherently” (Skolverket, 2012a, p. 38). The teachers do not have matrices to assess pronunciation since it is always included in other speaking skills.

Teaching and assessing pronunciation are closely related, as giving feedback is typical in the language classroom (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2005). Pronunciation is essential for successful oral communication (Derwing & Munro, 2011), and the teachers teach oral skills in almost every lesson. The communicative approach is dominant in language teaching, and oral skills play an enormous role as one of the main assessment criteria in the curriculum (Skolverket, 2012a). The teachers have similar oral tasks for formative and summative assessments, for example, presentations and tasks where students record their speaking. Different oral tasks were also the main assessment methods in Henderson et al. (2015), but pronunciation was assessed using other methods such as listening comprehension and written work, which differs from this study. The curriculum highlights overall communicative skills in Sweden, and the teachers primarily use methods from the communicative approach. None of the teachers use any oral tasks in which pronunciation is individually assessed, nor are there tasks in which summative assessment is done without any formative feedback. Summative assessments of pronunciation are rarely done, just a couple times per semester, but there are differences among the teachers.

5 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate how English teachers of ninth graders teach and assess pronunciation as part of oral skills. The chosen method, semi-structured interviews, consisted of six interviews and revealed that communicative methods dominate in teaching pronunciation; it is mostly included in different speaking and listening tasks. Intuitive-imitative methods apply as all the teachers try to help students to pronounce difficult words through listening and imitating without giving any
instruction of pronunciation. The analytic-linguistic approach still exists, as the teachers use it when they notice that their students have problems pronouncing difficult sounds, such as dental and palato-alveolar fricatives. Four teachers show these sounds from the IPA and explain how to pronounce them by giving instructions on articulation position. The other two teachers also teach how to pronounce these sounds, although they do not show any phonetic symbols.

However, pronunciation is integrated into other language skills, and the teachers do formative assessments in almost every lesson, providing constructive feedback to help students improve pronunciation. Pronunciation assessment methods varied from teacher to teacher. Some ask the students to record their speech to be evaluated with written feedback. Everybody gives oral feedback for the whole class, but two teachers do not provide any written feedback. The teachers want a classroom climate where students are active and encouraged to speak instead of being afraid to make mistakes, so they take great care in providing feedback.

Summative assessments of pronunciation are seldom done, only a few times per semester. Pronunciation is never assessed separately because it is not explicitly listed in the knowledge requirements of the curriculum, but rather is included in other speaking skills (Skolverket, 2012a). In assessing pronunciation, the teachers said they do not focus much on pronunciation unless they notice that their students have specific problems.

It could be possible to use this study in future research as a base for investigating the teaching and assessing of English pronunciation by using a quantitative method. The results showed that the teachers do not specifically focus on teaching pronunciation, but they assess it at least once a week. A questionnaire could provide answers as to the specific assignments teachers use for both teaching and assessing pronunciation, as well as how much time teachers spend on it. These aspects would be interesting to study, as there is a lack of research on how English teachers work with pronunciation in Sweden. In addition, it would be possible to compare what methods are used in the teaching and assessing of English pronunciation in Sweden versus other countries. That could expose more effective methods. The present case study gives a picture of teaching and assessing English pronunciation and could be utilised for a quantitative survey where the questions need to be more carefully formulated than in qualitative interviews. A
quantitative survey would increase external validity because of a higher number of participants. Although this study consisted of six teachers, it reached the aim and gave me more knowledge about the importance of pedagogical methods in the teaching of pronunciation, and how pronunciation could be assessed both formatively and summatively. That information will also help me in the future when I start working as an English teacher.
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Appendix A: Interview guide

Background
Age
Mother tongue
Education
Amount of years as an English teacher
Size of school

Theme 1. Definition of oral skills.

1. How would you define what oral skills mean and include?

Theme 2. How pronunciation is taught as part of oral skills in the ninth grade.

2. How is pronunciation included in your teaching?
3. What kinds of exercises do you have which focus on pronunciation?
4. What kinds of problems of pronunciation do you usually work with?
5. How do you support students if they have problems with pronunciation?
6. What kinds of goals do you have in teaching pronunciation?
7. What do you think is most important when teaching pronunciation?

Theme 3. Formative and summative assessments of English pronunciation in the ninth grade.

8. How do you assess pronunciation formatively? (If you do not, could you expound on why you do not assess pronunciation formatively?)
9. How do you assess pronunciation summatively? (If you do not, could you expound on why you do not assess pronunciation summatively?)
10. How often do you assess pronunciation?

Would you like to add anything regarding teaching and assessing English pronunciation?