

# **Pronunciation instruction in Moroccan Higher Education: students' attitudes and teachers' views**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper investigated (a) the attitudes of a group of Moroccan university students toward pronunciation; and (b) the views and practices of teachers in regard to pronunciation instruction. Attitudinal measures such as the perceived utility of pronunciation, level of confidence and interest in pronunciation were explored. Overall, students valued pronunciation as an important part of learning (both segmental features and suprasegmental features), aimed for functional intelligibility and wanted pronunciation teaching be improved. Teachers were not very keen on teaching pronunciation, particularly suprasegmentals. Reasons include lack of confidence, lack of time, scarcity of teaching materials and resources, and large groups.

**Keywords:** pronunciation teaching, prosody, suprasegmental, students' attitudes.

## **1. Review of the Literature**

### **1.1. Teachers' and students' views regarding pronunciation**

In his history of language teaching, Kelly (1969) called pronunciation the “Cinderella” area of foreign language teaching. He showed how researchers had studied grammar and vocabulary much longer than pronunciation. In his anthology on pronunciation teaching, Brown (1991) says that “pronunciation has sometimes been referred to as the ‘poor relation’ aspect of the English language which is often given little attention, if completely ignored, by the teacher in the classroom” (p. 1). Language teachers have been much more concerned with grammar and vocabulary than with pronunciation. Many teachers admit that their neglect of pronunciation is not due to their lack of interest in the subject but rather to lack of confidence in teaching it. They feel they need more knowledge about, and skills relating to the teaching of pronunciation (Brown, 1992; Murphy, 1997; Roads; 1999; Yates, 2001; Macdonald, 2002).

Brown (1992), for example, showed that the majority of the teachers surveyed thought TESOL training did not cover pronunciation teaching well and felt powerless as to meeting the objectives of pronunciation instruction. They also reported lack of knowledge about the phonetics of foreign languages. Furthermore, they believed that while they felt they had confidence in teaching the segmental features of English, they would like to have a good grounding in the theory and the pedagogy of teaching suprasegmental features. Roads (1999) surveyed a number of EFL teachers and found that few of them believed that intonation was actually teachable. In fact, merely 5% of the respondents declared they were confident about teaching intonation.

Murphy (1997), conducting a survey among teachers in more than forty institutions, found that teachers of phonology based courses put greater focus first on segmental aspects of the language, then on the learning of a system of transcription and finally on suprasegmental aspects. The respondents said they needed to have access to recorded samples of L2 learners speech (84%), more adequate software (65%), and more focus on suprasegmental features (60%). Only a few asked for more emphasis on segmental features (14%).

In contrast to the reluctance shown by teachers, learners placed a high value on instruction in pronunciation as reported in some studies pointing to a contradiction between the teacher's and the student's perspectives on pronunciation teaching (Edwards, 1992, cited

in Barrera Pardo, 2004; Madden & Moore, 1997; Vitanova & Miller, 2002). Edwards (1992, cited in Barrera Pardo, 2004) found in a survey that 94% of the learners studying an introductory course to English phonetics and phonology believed that phonology was helpful in learning pronunciation, and what they appreciated most about the course were laboratory sessions and word level transcription. Madden & Moore (1997) surveyed 49 intermediate ESL students at university and found that the students considered pronunciation to be very valuable and needed more emphasis be placed on its teaching and more emphasis on intonation. Most of the respondents were not satisfied with their current pronunciation (71%) and defined good pronunciation as sounding like a native speaker (57%) and as being able to be understood (41%). Vitanova & Miller (2002) found that students linked the mastery of pronunciation with improved communicative abilities, reflected on the value of learning both segmentals and suprasegmentals, and the importance of pronunciation in achieving confidence in communication.

## **1.2. The importance of suprasegmentals**

Traditional thinking on syllabus design assumed that mastering pronunciation is simply a matter of perfecting the production of an inventory of consonants and vowels. While there is no denying that phonetics at the segmental level is certainly crucial in pronunciation, suprasegmental, or prosodic features, such as stress and intonation are equally important. According to Pennington & Richards (1986), effective teaching of pronunciation must include segmental features, voice-setting features and prosodic features. Many researchers even emphasized the need to teach pronunciation from a “top-down” approach, i.e. focusing on the rhythm and intonation of entire phrases and sentences, rather than from a “bottom-up” approach based on individual sounds or words (Pennington & Richards, 1986; Pennington, 1989). The justification of such pedagogical sequencing is based on research showing that prosodic features of language contribute more to intelligibility than do segmental features (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson, & Koehler, 1992; McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992; Gilbert, 1993).

An example of anecdotal evidence showing the communication problems caused by the inaccurate use of suprasegmental features is reported in Kelly (2000). A Turkish learner produced the following request with sentence stress on the first syllable of *open*, rather than on the expected first syllable of *window*: “Do you mind if I open the window?” The utterance might seem to be rude as it could be interpreted as being a second request if the first one is

considered not to have been heard. Aspects of L1 can also be carried over to English in terms of perceived mood of an utterance. Spanish and Japanese learners have a tendency to use a much narrower intonation change, which makes them sound bored and disinterested to a native speaker (Loveday, 1981; Stockwell & Bowen, 1965).

Actually, prioritising and polarising “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to the teaching of pronunciation is not of great importance. To do so would not comply with the fact that the segmental and the suprasegmental features of a language tend to be overlapping and complimentary. An equal focus on both components of pronunciation is necessary, as Taylor (1996) has written:

... there is a close connection between word stress and the pronunciation of vowels, and the ability to predict and recognise word stress patterns can help learners to pronounce vowels correctly. Conversely, a knowledge of the correct pronunciation of the vowels in a word will give the learners a clear indication of its stress pattern. (p. 46)

## **2. Students’ attitudes about pronunciation**

### **2.1. Description of study**

Research on pronunciation is relatively scarce compared to that on other components of language learning. Yet, it is important to study the students’ needs and the teachers’ attitudes towards pronunciation when constructing the pronunciation syllabus (or the pronunciation component of a multi-skills course). This can allow teachers to better implement or fine-tune their course objectives.

The aims of this study were twofold: (1) to study the attitudes of Moroccan university students toward the study of pronunciation; (2) to investigate the views and practices of some teachers who teach pronunciation within a Spoken English course.

### **2.2. Research questions**

One goal of the present paper was to identify students’ attitudes and views regarding pronunciations. The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. Is the learning of English pronunciation important? And if so, what is the reason?
2. What is their level of satisfaction regarding pronunciation instruction?
3. What is the relative importance of the different components of pronunciation?

4. Are classroom activities sufficient to improve their pronunciation?

### **2.3. Methodology**

The subjects were 100 Semester Three students from the Department of English at Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida, Morocco. All the students are Moroccan. They had all studied Spoken English I and Spoken English II in Semester One and Semester Two, respectively. The subjects were administered a questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale. They were informed that data collection from the questionnaire would only be used for research purposes (see Appendix A).

The questionnaires were distributed and completed during the scheduled class period. The author provided survey instructions. The author and the cooperating teachers, who were entirely available for the survey session, assisted with questions related to completing the questionnaire. Most subjects took less than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

### **2.4. Class Description**

The BA English Studies programme is modular. First year modules designed to develop English language skills include ‘Spoken English’, ‘Reading Comprehension’, ‘Composition’, and ‘Grammar’. The course of Spoken English is a required core curriculum course. It is taught in Semester One and in Semester Two for two hours a week. The course aims to enhance students’ ability to speak in a variety of social and academic situations and to improve their listening comprehension of English. Particular emphasis is given to improve pronunciation and phonetic transcription of English both at the segmental and suprasegmental levels.

### **2.5. Findings**

University students appear generally to be positive about the teaching of pronunciation and its impact on their educational experience. When asked if they thought teaching pronunciation is important, an overwhelming majority (96%) of the students strongly-agreed or agreed that that English pronunciation was helpful to their educational experience. When asked why it was important to learn pronunciation, a number of reasons were expressed. Students responses are displayed in Table 1. The goal of more than half of the students (60%) is quite realistic, simply aiming for functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself easily understood). A student, for example, wrote:

I want to learn pronunciation ... because when we don't pronounce well, the listener cannot understand what we want to say. Sometimes also, if pronunciation is not clear, the hearer may not understand what we say.

Only 2% aimed for greater proximity to a native speaker model. Interestingly, 23% linked pronunciation with improved communication abilities. Some students (5%) reflected on affective needs: the desire to enhance self-confidence in speaking English. The fact that the majority here aimed for intelligibility (60%) is not in agreement with the study of Madden & Moore (1997) where 57% of their respondents defined good pronunciation as sounding like a native speaker, while 41% linked it to being able to be understood. The reason is that since the subjects in their study are exposed to native speakers, they feel frustrated when the latter are irritated by their foreign accent. The importance of such socio-affective factors in showing students' attitudes were similarly stressed in Vitanova & Miller (2002). Moroccan learners hardly have the opportunity to test or develop their pronunciation skills in an authentic social context. Thus, there is very little incentive for them to view their pronunciation learning as targeting native-like speech.

Reason	Percentage
To be easily understood	60%
To communicate well / easily	23%
To feel more comfortable	5%
To show your mastery of English	3%
To be able to speak English like a native speaker	2%
No response	7%

**Table 1.** *Reasons for the study of pronunciation.*

In regards to the subjects' perception of the role of Spoken English, whether or not pronunciation instruction was satisfying, 83% of the subjects showed their dissatisfaction with the way pronunciation is taught; only 6% reported they were satisfied, while 11% could not judge.

Students' views strongly emphasized the usefulness of teaching not only suprasegmental features of English but also that of sounds and IPA. With regard to the item, studying

segmentals and IPA is very helpful, the “strongly agree/agree” rating given was highly positive (87%) compared to the “strongly disagree/ disagree” rating at a mere 4%. In the item ‘studying suprasegmentals is very helpful’ the rating was also highly positive (84%), with only 6% of the students disagreeing with that statement. This suggest that students value the study of both segmental features and suprasegmental ones.

With regard to the last item in the questionnaire, students reported overall disagreement with the statement, classroom activities are sufficient to improve your accent (17% strongly disagreed, 55% disagreed) while 19% agreed; the remainder was neutral. The lack of confidence in classroom activities is naturally linked to their general dissatisfaction with the teaching of pronunciation. Students are probably aware of the benefits of using other resources for pronunciation teaching (e.g. the use of the laboratory, pronunciation teaching software and internet resources).

### **3. Teachers’ current practice**

#### **3.1. Research questions**

The second aim of the present paper was to investigate the views and practices of some teachers who teach pronunciation within the Spoken English course. The following questions guided this inquiry:

1. How much time within the Spoken English course is devoted to pronunciation?
2. How much do teachers like teaching pronunciation?
3. What features of pronunciation are teachers teaching?
4. What reasons push teachers to focus on an aspect/aspects of pronunciation?
5. How confident are they about teaching a given aspect of pronunciation?
6. What materials are they using?

#### **3.2. Methodology**

A written questionnaire was used to probe teachers’ practice and views regarding pronunciation. It contained three closed questions using a five-point Likert scale and six open questions to determine additional information (see Appendix B).

The sample included 10 teachers, all of whom are from the Department of English, Chouaib Doukkali University. Nine of the participants were male and one was female. The number of years employed at the university ranged between 3-20 years (Mean = 14.8 years). There was prior intention to survey teachers from other Moroccan universities. However, the return rate was so low (4%) that the author decided to limit the study to Chouaib Doukkali University. All the teachers surveyed were native speakers of Moroccan Arabic

### **3.3. Findings**

In the first question, teachers were asked to indicate how much time they allocate to pronunciation instruction within the Spoken English course. As can be seen from Table 2, responses varied from 15 minutes to 60 minutes, i.e. from 10% to 50% of the total course duration. The average time teachers spend on pronunciation teaching is 30 minutes, i.e. 25% of any typical class session. Fifteen minutes per class session is undoubtedly not acceptable to meet the objectives of the course (see class description above). Forty-five minutes, roughly 37% of class time should rather be devoted to pronunciation if student's needs are to be attended.

The second question concerned how much respondents liked teaching pronunciation. They were asked to give a rating response on a 5-point scale where 5 = Very Much and 1 = Very Little. Table 2 shows that three out of ten said "very much", six said "somewhat" and one said "very little". Obviously, the degree of liking for pronunciation teaching is linked to the amount of time devoted to it.

In Questions 3 and 4, teachers were asked to rate their frequency and confidence level in teaching the different components of pronunciation on a 5-point Likert-type scale (see Table 3). The responses to these items were given a numerical value (1 to 5). On the first 5-point scale, a rating of 1 = Very rarely and a rating of 5 = Very Often, whereas on the second a rating of 1 = Not at all Confident and a rating of 5 = Very Confident. In terms of frequency of teaching, Sounds and IPA have the highest average response values (4.87, 4.12, respectively), followed by stress (3.37). Intonation, rhythm and connected speech have the lowest average values (1.75, 1.75 and 1.87, respectively). This finding is not consistent with what students believed should be taught. The teaching of segmentals and suprasegmentals was equally valued by them as was indicated above.

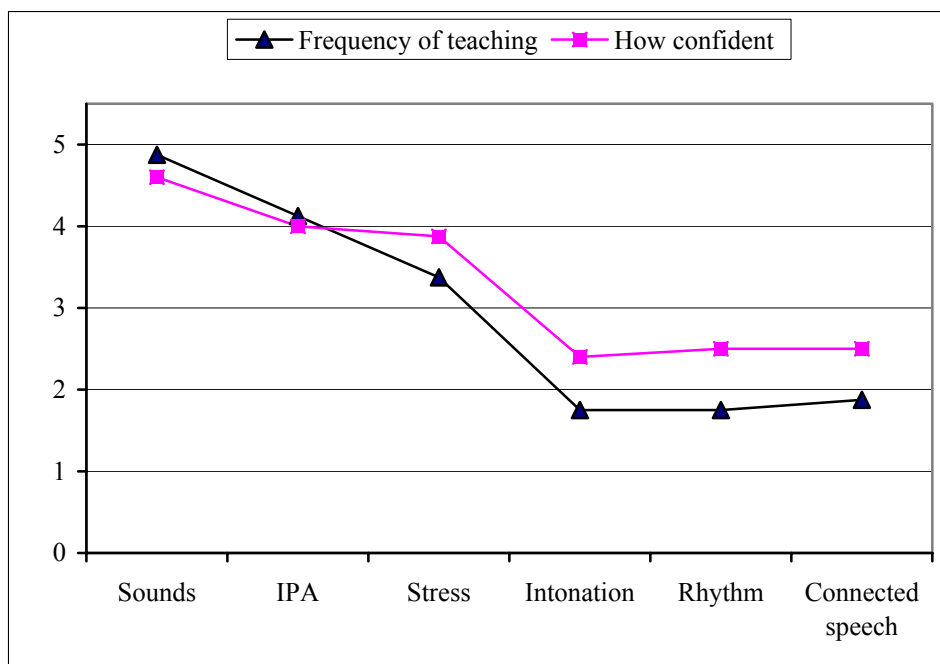
Respondent number	How much do you like teaching pronunciation	How much time within the course is devoted to pronunciation	Years teaching
1	Somewhat	(very little, 15 mn)	15
2	Very little	20 mn	17
3	Very much	1 hour	18
4	Somewhat	25 mn	3
5	Somewhat	35 mn	20
6	Somewhat	30 mn	14
7	Very much	1 hour	18
8	Very much	30 mn	17
9	Somewhat	15 mn	10
10	Somewhat	(very little, 15 mn)	16

**Table 2.** Teachers responses to two items: (a) How much do you like teaching pronunciation, and (b) how much time within the course is devoted to pronunciation.

In terms of confidence level in teaching the different components of pronunciation, Sounds scored 4.6 and IPA 4, followed by stress which scored 3.87. Intonation, rhythm and connected speech scored only 2.4. Figure 1 shows that there is some kind of correlation between the teachers' frequency and confidence level in teaching the different features of pronunciation. It seems that teachers tend to frequently cover those features in which they feel confident to teach: sounds and IPA, and to some extent, stress. On the contrary, prosodic features such as intonation, rhythm and connected speech tend to be avoided as teachers lack confidence in teaching them. This finding concords with research reviewed above (Brown, 1992; Yates, 2001; Macdonald, 2002).

	How often do you teach	How confident are you in teaching
Sounds	4.87	4.6
IPA	4.12	4
Stress	3.37	3.87
Intonation	1.75	2.4
Rhythm	1.75	2.4
Connected speech	1.87	2.4

**Table 3.** Teachers responses to two items: (a) How often do you teach, and (b) how confident are you in teaching the following aspects of pronunciation (Sounds, IPA, Stress, Intonation, Rhythm, Connected Speech).



**Figure 1.** Comparison between teachers' frequency and confidence level in teaching the different components of pronunciation.

The fifth question was an open-ended question. It was posed to learn what reasons push teachers not to focus on suprasegmentals. The reasons teachers gave in response to this

question are listed in Table 4. The range of answers was wide, reflecting teachers' differing circumstances, background and attitudes. Nonetheless, the primary reason cited was lack of sufficient time to cover the content of the course. For example, one teacher commented:

I rarely deal with suprasegmental features of English. Our students have tremendous difficulties with sounds ... We should not forget that the course of Spoken English consists of two main components: pronunciation and communication activities. I need to give students the opportunity to give oral presentations during class time.

The second most commonly cited reason is that class groups were very large. For example, one respondent said that "large group sizes do not facilitate the teaching of pronunciation, especially if we want to do practicals". It was surprising that one reasoned that suprasegmentals did not affect much intelligibility. Such reasoning is perhaps based on the inaccurate assumptions that mastery of syntactic structures automatically insured that a sentence would be understood as statement or a question and that properly chosen lexical items would adequately signal a particular attitude. However, it was shown that this redundancy argument is faulty because first, intonation provides meaning not coded in any other form, and second, learners should not only make themselves intelligible, but also be capable to understand the intonational subtleties made by native speakers (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 1996).

In Question 6, teachers were asked which teaching materials they are familiar with. The most frequently mentioned teaching material was web resources (4 times). Other reported teaching materials included the following: CDs, pronunciation software, videos, audio tapes and reference books such as Ladefoged (1975) and Schane (1973). It is surprising to note that no teacher cited using pedagogical handbooks or teacher resource books that specifically address issues of pronunciation instruction.

Question 7 asked teachers to indicate how they had learnt about the teaching of pronunciation. In general, teachers reported they learnt about the subject from their education background in linguistics (mentioned by 4), reference books (mentioned by 4), and the internet (mentioned by 1). It is interesting to note here that no teacher said he completed a training programme in pronunciation or phonetics.

In the final section of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to comment on anything else about the teaching of pronunciation that they felt was important. Only five respondents made additional comments. Most of such comments were on the requirements needed to ensure

successful pronunciation instruction. These requirements included the following: a language laboratory (mentioned by 5), classroom materials and teaching resources (mentioned by 4), small groups (mentioned by 3). One respondent said students should be exposed to native speech as often as possible. Another respondent questioned the relevance of teaching pronunciation within the Spoken English course. For him, pronunciation should not be covered at all in this course. On the other hand, one respondent stressed that improving all aspects of pronunciation is among the objectives that the Spoken English course should fulfil. Such objectives also include the following: developing listening skills, speaking English in a variety of contexts, and extending knowledge of current English vocabulary.

<i>Response (N=10)</i>	<i>n*</i>
Time constraints	5
Large group sizes	4
Felt they needed to allocate time rather to develop students' speaking skills by giving them an opportunity to give oral presentations in class	2
Believed that suprasegmentals do not affect much intercomprehension	1
Felt they cannot teach suprasegmentals as they are not native speakers	1
Felt students lacked motivation	1
Believed that students had tremendous difficulties with the pronunciation of sounds	1

\* The numbers (n) do not sum to 10 because each individual teacher could report more than one reason for why they did not focus on suprasegmentals.

**Table 4.** Responses to the open-ended question asking “why teachers did not focus on suprasegmental.”.

#### 4. Discussion and implications

As with any research, there are some limitations to this study. First, the sample used in the survey consisted of only 10 teachers. Due to the small sample size, any inference about more general populations is hypothetical and would need to be substantiated by further research. The survey also did not investigate specifics of pronunciation instruction. For example, it

failed to ask any questions related to the techniques and procedures used in the classroom. Nevertheless, the attitudes and views given by the small group of teachers indicate that there is need for focus in the area of pronunciation teaching. Comparison of students' attitudes about learning pronunciation with those of their teachers revealed some kind of a paradox. Students showed considerable enthusiasm for pronunciation. They felt it would help them be more intelligible and confident and to communicate better. However, only a few teachers were keen on the subject and most of them avoided teaching prosodic features of English. This result agrees with research showing that pronunciation is one of the most consistent points of conflict between learners and teachers (Kern, 1995)

Finding of this study indicate that intelligibility is the most appropriate goal for Moroccan students. They simply want to be understood when communicating in English, not to sound like a native speaker. Thus, teachers should aim at intelligibility rather than accuracy when constructing their pronunciation syllabus. To achieve this, teachers need to focus on all the elements that contribute to intelligibility: prosodic features (including stress, intonation and rhythm) and sounds. As was said in the review of the literature, when learners lack adequate control of suprasegmental features, their ability to communicate is severely limited. Prosodic aspects must be considered a critical component of oral proficiency and of what students should be taught in Spoken English. The teaching of these aspects will help students not only develop greater expressiveness and articulacy in English but also achieve better understanding of some of the subtleties of native-speaker speech. Only after meaningful learning of the pronunciation features can teachers deal with issues of phonetic accuracy. Research by the author on the phonetic acquisition of English as a foreign language by Moroccan university students has shown some acoustic differences in the production of sentence stress and lexical stress. In Yeou (2004) it was shown that the acoustic characteristics of accentual focus produced by the Moroccan learners of English were generally not identical to that produced by native American speakers. The Moroccan speakers were found to produce focused words with higher pitch, longer duration and lower intensity. Yeou (2005) reported that Moroccan university students of English transfer the F0 alignment and durational patterns of their native language to English. Their accentual rises were aligned earlier and accented syllables were much longer, compared to English.

In light of this, there is need for teacher training: "to be adequately prepared to teach pronunciation, teachers must have at their disposal a working knowledge of articulatory phonetics, theories of second language phonological acquisition, and an up-to-date command

of techniques and procedures to use in the classroom (Parish, 1977, cited in Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Teachers should address all aspects of pronunciation regularly and consistently and give them more prominence within the course of Spoken English.

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• Studying segmentals and IPA is very helpful

*strongly agree*  *agree*  *no opinion*  *agree*  *strongly disagree*

• Studying suprasegmental features such as stress, intonation and rhythm is very helpful

*strongly agree*  *agree*  *no opinion*  *agree*  *strongly disagree*

• Classroom activities are sufficient to improve your pronunciation?

*strongly agree*  *agree*  *no opinion*  *agree*  *strongly disagree*

## Appendix B

### A questionnaire toward a study of teachers' views about pronunciation teaching

• How long have you taught English?

• How much do you like teaching pronunciation

<i>very much</i>					<i>very little</i>
1	2	3	4	5	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

• How much time within Spoken English course is devoted to pronunciation?

• How often do you teach the following aspects of pronunciation

	<i>very often</i>		<i>very rarely</i>		
	1	2	3	4	5
sounds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
IPA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
rhythm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
intonation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
features of connected speech	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

• Give some reasons why you would not focus on the following aspects of pronunciation

- Stress
- Rhythm

- Intonation
- features of connected speech

• How confident are you about teaching the following features of pronunciation

	<i>very confident</i>			<i>not at all confident</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5
sounds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
IPA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
stress	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
rhythm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
intonation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
features of connected speech	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Which pronunciation teaching materials are you aware of/familiar with?
- Which do you use? Why?
- How have you learnt what you know about the teaching and learning of pronunciation?
- Any other comments