

“I’m come to have lessons, I am”

*Pygmalion*, Power and Pronunciation

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## Abstract

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**Summary:** The Swedish steering documents for English in upper secondary school put emphasis on the communicative approach, which focuses on function instead of form. Goals and criteria do not formulate a systematic awareness of language but knowledge of language as a tool for communication. The purpose of this essay is to highlight the importance of pronunciation practice in schools today. To be able to enunciate phonemes, and to use stress and intonation correctly, is vital in all verbal communication and thus something we need to address in teaching English as a foreign language. By using George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, the essay shows how pronunciation has been, and still might be, the cause of prejudice and social determiner. We are perceived by the way we speak and use our language, and it does not only give assumptions as to where we are from but also who we are. The play *Pygmalion*, and thus this essay, is a vast source for discussions about social class and equality, linguistic prejudice and intrinsic worth, the ambiguous need for transformation and the power of education. Eliza Doolittle's metamorphosis, from a simple flower girl to an admirable lady of such distinction that she can be taken for a princess, is due mainly by the phonetic skills of professor Higgins. Examples are therefore given on how to implement Higgins audio-lingual teaching methods in the pronunciation teaching of today. The communicative approach does not have to exclude focus on form to stay communicative. This essay claims that a focus on form may instead benefit intelligibility in communication.

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## Introduction

The Swedish steering documents for English in upper secondary school emphasizes the communicative approach, which focuses on language *use* instead of language knowledge. Goals and criteria do not formulate a systematic awareness of language but knowledge of language as a tool for communication (Jönsson 193). However, an essential part of communicative competence is based on linguistic proficiency such as vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structures, spelling, linguistic semantics and pronunciation. The emphasis in this essay will be on the latter: *pronunciation*.

Numerous studies have examined the different aspects of the communicative approach, and the acquisition of language skills. But the acquisition of target language pronunciation seems not to have been a point of interest, and it has thus “suffered from serious neglect in the communicative classroom” (Elliot 95). Nevertheless, studies have shown that proper pronunciation is important and that people tend to listen for stress patterns to define what is important in an utterance (Tarone 1974). Knowledge of stress and syllable patterns will thus facilitate comprehension and a learner who wishes to make him or herself intelligible in English therefore needs to be able to pronounce words accurately. According to Tricia Hedge, teachers provide a fair amount of pronunciation practice in the early stages of language learning but discontinue this in the later stages (119). I believe pronunciation practice needs continuity even in the later stages of language learning.

The aim of this essay is to highlight the linguistic ability/skill of pronunciation and to argue that it is something we ought to address more in schools today. To be able to enunciate phonemes, and to use stress and intonation correctly, are in my opinion of most importance in all verbal communication and thus something we need to address in teaching English as a foreign language. By using George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, I will show how pronunciation has been, and still might be, the cause of prejudice and social determiner.

The first chapter briefly describes *Pygmalion* from the origins in the Greek myth to the musical adaptation in *My Fair Lady*. The play/plot is however not described in detail. The second chapter discusses linguistic prejudice and the role of language in identity; hence the act of Eliza's transformation will be analyzed. Chapter three deals with the teaching of pronunciation. In addition the teacher role is examined and thus professor Higgins as a teacher. This chapter also suggests ways on how to use the play in the classroom.

In this essay I presuppose a Standard English. My definition of the term is based on David Crystal's statement that it "is the variety [of English] which carries most prestige within a country ... and is most widely understood" (110). There are accordingly many forms of Standard English throughout the English-speaking world. The British colonial power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the leading economic power of the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> have however made the Standard English spoken in these two countries more prestigious than others. In Shaw's *Pygmalion*, British RP is the norm to which other accents are defined.

The word intelligible is frequently used throughout the essay. According to Talia Isaacs "there is neither a universally accepted definition of *intelligibility* nor a field-wide consensus on how to best measure it" (556); still, this has been commonly regarded as the goal for second language pronunciation. My definition of being intelligible, based on Isaacs' study, is to be able to participate in conversations where the listener does not have to make any, or very little effort to understand what you are saying. The listener should not get distracted by the way you speak but instead listen to what you are saying. A pronunciation that strongly deviates from that of the norm may disturb comprehension of an utterance (Cerú ed. 202). To be intelligible is thus to avoid mistakes that impede communication, and therefore involves both linguistic and communicative competence.

## Why *Pygmalion*?

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, written in 1912, is the basis for this essay since the play "is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else" (Shaw, in the added preface of *Pygmalion*, 1916, par. 6<sup>1</sup>).

Literature is considered authentic material in the sense that it is not produced for the purpose of teaching a language. It is intended for native speakers and the language is thus not simplified or corrected, which gives the learner access to conventions and genuine linguistic uses of the target language. It also gives the reader cultural information and awareness of the codes, preoccupations and structures of the depicted society (Collie & Slater 3-4).

To be in line with Stephen Krashen's comprehensible input theory in second language acquisition, there are many things to consider when choosing a literary text to use in the classroom. The experience, the everyday life and the emotions of the students must be taken into account, as well as their level of language knowledge. To choose a play written almost a century ago that deals with phonetics might be getting into deep waters for students of the twenty-first century. But "literature offers a ... varied body of material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues" (Collie & Slater 3) and the *Pygmalion* theme, the theme of transformation, is something I believe is as well suited for the twenty-first century as for the 10 AD audience of Ovid.

The play is a vast source for discussions about social class and equality, linguistic prejudice and intrinsic worth, the ambiguous need for transformation and the power of education. The focal point of this essay is the linguistic feature of pronunciation as a tool for communicative success, and what literary work would suit better than a play that deals with the exact same thing. Eliza Doolittle's metamorphosis, from a simple flower girl to an admirable lady of such distinction that she can be

taken for a princess, is due mainly by the phonetic skills of professor Higgins. His teaching methods have however been accused of being out of date and repetitive, therefore this essay will give proof on how to breathe new life into repetitive drills and audio-lingual methods.

## Chapter one: *Pygmalion*

### From Ancient Myth to Famous Musical

In 10 AD the Roman poet Ovid wrote a long narrative poem of fifteen books, called *Metamorphoses*. In this poem he retells historical, legendary and mythological events of the old world. The Greek story of a sculptor named Pygmalion is in one of those books. Pygmalion lived on the island of Cyprus and he detested women. Instead of spending time on the opposite sex he dedicated himself to his art. “In the course of time he successfully carved an amazingly skilful statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect feminine beauty” (394). Pygmalion cannot help but to fall in love with his statue and treats it as it were human, clothing her, bringing her gifts and embracing her at night – wishing she would be real. Venus, the Roman goddess of love, grants his unspoken wish and turns the hard cold ivory to soft warm flesh. The perfectly carved statue, later named Galatea, transforms into a living human being under the caressing hands of her misogynist sculptor.

In 1912, George Bernard Shaw took this old Pygmalion myth and transformed it into a socialist parable through a comedy of manners (*Mugglestone* 374). The phonetician professor Henry Higgins makes a bet with his friend colonel Pickering, to transform the Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle into a duchess in just a few months. He teaches her to speak and act like a lady, and in six months time Eliza is taken for a princess at an embassy ball. Shaw’s take on the old myth was influenced by the plays of such playwrights as Henrik Ibsen who criticized the hypocrisy of the middle-class, through realistic drama. Accordingly, Shaw made his Galatea a modern working-class girl who talks back at her creator, and his Pygmalion “a snob who refuses to fall in love with the woman he claims to have created” (*Hynes* XVI). Shaw was a social activist and a lifelong defender of women’s rights and *Pygmalion* is consequently a comment to the social discourse of the time. On the surface the play declares phonetics as the remedial for class based problems in society but it also conveys a deeper

message of “a consideration of the nature of equality in itself, and of the superficial issues which may obscure such knowledge” (Mugglestone 377).

When *Pygmalion* opened in London in 1914 it quickly became one of Shaw’s most popular plays and in 1938 it was turned into a movie. Shaw himself collaborated on the screenplay and won an Academy Award for it in 1939<sup>ii</sup>. The black and white movie differs from the original play insofar that there is a new romantic ending to the story. Eliza comes back to Higgins at the end, opening for the immortal closing line “Where the devil are my slippers, Eliza?” This romantic twist at the end was though added without Shaw’s complete consent. The movie also depicts the actual lessons professor Higgins gives Eliza, providing yet another immortal line: “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plains”. In the original play these lessons are not to be seen more than in a brief review of the nature of them (one of the scenes that are omitted in many publications of the play) and we are left merely with the result of them.

Alan Jay Lerner adopted the alterations from the movie when he wrote the musical *My Fair Lady*, in 1956, together with composer Frederick Loewe. *My Fair Lady* is intimately based on the play and in most parts follows it line by line. The musical ran on Broadway for six years and in 1964, Warner Brothers made a movie out of it. The movie version with Audrey Hepburn as Eliza Doolittle was of course also a huge success. Adaptations of the play and the musical have been made in many different languages and it is still played all over the world.<sup>iii</sup>

## Shaw versus Ovid

The resemblance of Ovid’s *Pygmalion* to professor Higgins is evident. They are both notorious misogynists who willingly choose a bachelor’s life. The original play differs from the myth in the fact that Henry and Eliza do not end up together. The later versions, however, provide the audience with a sculptor of phonetics that “in spite of himself, falls in love with his own creation” (Hung 146) and thus stay true to the myth. There is also a parallel to the way *Pygmalion* dresses and pampers his

statue, Higgins and Colonel Pickering do that as well, to such extent in fact that old Mrs.

Higgins exclaims: “You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll” (82).

The most significant differences are of course that Shaw transforms the sculptor into a teacher, the ivory into a shabby flower girl, and the beautiful statue into an artificial duchess. The process of cold ivory turned to human flesh is transformed into “an educational ticket to higher social status” (Porten 70). The character of Eliza is also far from the submissive Galatea. The statue becoming an obedient wife was the common theme for operas and ballets based on the myth during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. With Shaw’s socialist view of equal rights for all, Galatea, through Eliza, is finally standing up for herself against the oppression of her creator. This is probably why Shaw did not comply with the altered romantic ending of the 1938 movie and later *My Fair Lady*, which obviously undermines the strength of Eliza as an individual and she becomes Pygmalion’s Galatea all over again.

## Chapter two: Linguistic Prejudice

“Part of speaking the English language competently is the ability to produce its sounds in ways that are intelligible to other speakers” (268). The words of Tricia Hedge are in parity with Shaw’s thoughts in the added preface for *Pygmalion*, although Shaw takes it a step further:

The English have no respect for their language ... It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him. ... English is not accessible even to Englishmen. The reformer England needs today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play. (par. 2)

Even though Henry Higgins is claimed to be the hero of the play, it is Eliza Doolittle who steals the hearts of the audience. Eliza speaks with a broad Cockney accent, which at the time was “seen as a kind of social pariah” (380) according to Lynda Mugglestone, who goes on to quote a report on the teaching of English in elementary schools from 1909: “Most dialects have their own distinctive charm and historical interest; but Cockneyism seems to have no redeeming features, and need only to be heard to be condemned” (380). This statement displays the prevailing kind of linguistic prejudice of the time that made Henry Higgins exclaim: “A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live.” (Shaw 22)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, into which Shaw was born, a new conception of social identity was formed, and thus also distinctions between different social classes. Mugglestone refers to the fact that the word *working class* first appeared in OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*) in 1816, the *upper class* in 1826 and the concept of *class-consciousness* as late as 1887 (374). The common preconception of the time was that your accent determined not only your social status but also your social acceptability, or as Henry Higgins says in *Pygmalion*: “It’s ... the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul” (82). Higgins affirms that Eliza’s deviation from the Standard English norm makes her

socially unacceptable: “You see this creature with her kerbstone [sic] English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days” (23). Shaw consequently points out that our accent does not only determine our place in the present but also works as a determinant for the future, and thus prevent the socialist pathos of equality for all.

### Subjective inequality

As professor, and belonging to the socio-economic upper class, Higgins’s way of treating the flower girl Eliza is a testimony of the subjective inequality between them. This is displayed throughout the play in his many degrading names for her: squashed cabbage leaf, incarnate insult to the English language, draggle-tailed guttersnipe, baggage, and many more. Because of the way she speaks he immediately places her in a lower social position than his own and thus thinks of her as inferior to himself – a social judgment based on linguistics.

Every time we open our mouths to make an utterance we disclose who we are. Even if the majority of mankind does not possess the abilities of professor Higgins to place a man “within two streets” (Shaw 22), many of us instinctively have preconceptions about a speaker: gender, age, origin, and level of education. With these preconceptions we consciously, or unconsciously, also make assumptions and value judgments about the speaker’s personality and socio-economic class. Leah Zuidema claims that “[t]hese assumptions are not inconsequential thoughts. People act on their ideas, and, as a result, prejudice becomes active discrimination” (666). Every day we see this kind of discrimination, negative or positive, when applying for a job, an apartment, a promotion, or any type of recommendation. We are perceived by the way we speak and use our language, and it does not only give assumptions as to where we are from but also *who* we are.

A contemporary to Shaw, George Gissing, wrote in his novel *Grub Street*: “The London work-girl is rarely capable of raising herself, or being raised, to a place in life above that to which she was born; she cannot learn how to stand and sit and move like a woman bred to refinement, any more than she

can fashion her tongue to graceful speech” (qtd. in Mugglestone 373). The fact that Shaw makes a poor flower girl, and a Cockney at that, the protagonist of his play is thus a major statement of his socialist beliefs in underlying equality.

Social barriers may not be as evident today as a century ago, but the division between different groups of society is still vivid in people’s preconceptions, and assumptions made on linguistic preferences are something we see on a daily basis. Somehow linguistic prejudice is considered acceptable and more politically correct than other kinds of discrimination although people are dismissed, or favored, daily by the way they talk. Zuidema speaks of the fact that there is much effort put into making teachers realize their responsibility to “accept and accommodate diverse students’ languages” (667) but there is not much about how we should teach our students to be “accepting of linguistic diversity” (ibid). She continues by adding that these students, who is considered the mainstream and the norm of society, are the ones “who hold – or, as adults, will hold – much of the power that allows linguistic stigmatization and discrimination to continue” (ibid), hence the subject matter is important to work on in schools today.

### Communicative inequality

Pronunciation, however, is not the only thing that defines social class. When Eliza is accepted as a student of professor Higgins, she is cleaned up by the housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, and dressed in the latest fashion. The bath scene conveys yet another prejudice towards Eliza and her peers when Mrs. Pearce says: “Well, don’t you want to be clean and sweet and decent, like a lady? You know you can’t be a nice girl inside if youre [sic] a dirty slut outside” (45). Although Eliza as a person fundamentally stays the same it is clear that superficial appearance; pronunciation, cleanliness and clothing, makes a difference in how she is perceived. This is clearly stated in a scene at a tea party at old Mrs. Higgins’ in Act III (in *My Fair Lady* this scene is set at the Ascot Racecourse).

Professor Higgins persuades his mother into letting Eliza join the upper class tea party, where Mrs. Eynsford Hill, her daughter Clara and son Freddy, are present. A funny coincidence it seems, as the Eynsford Hills are the very same people that Eliza met, hiding for the rain, in Act I. Then – a dirty Cockney flower girl, now – dressed in the latest fashion and “speaking with pedantic correctness of pronunciation and great beauty of tone” (75). The guests at the party do not recognize her and treat her quite the opposite from the first Act.

Eliza has been taught the correctness of speech, but she has not yet learned the proper discourse and vocabulary for occasions such as these. The communicative inequality between Eliza and the other guests is evident. She speaks of things not suitable in a respectable upper class gathering, but her polished exterior and impeccable enunciation leave the company in awe nonetheless. Clara Eynsford Hill, who thought the flower girl Eliza was unworthy of conversation in Act I, is now in utter admiration and perceives Eliza as a role model. Freddy, her brother, who fell over Eliza in Act I, is now instead falling in love.

Although the guests at the tea party are convinced to think of Eliza’s unfitting conversational skills as the new small talk, the reader, or audience of the play see the opposite: a failure of communicative competence. When asked about Eliza’s performance, old Mrs. Higgins exclaim: “You silly boy, of course she’s not presentable. She’s a triumph of your art and of her dressmaker’s; but if you suppose for a moment that she doesn’t give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her” (81). Consequently, Shaw displays the hypocrisy of the upper classes when the guests are unable to see through the charade for the reason of obvious superficiality. The communicative inequality in Act III is thus not as significant as the subjective inequality of Act I.

Communicative competence is what our curricula and syllabi put emphasis on. “The key components ... can be listed as: *linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and fluency*” (Hedge 46). In the tea party scene Eliza is insufficient in the proficiency of pragmatic and discourse competence but manages to sustain the charade through her

newly achieved linguistic ability. In this way the scene states what Hedge points out that the “linguistic competence is an integral part of communicative competence” (47) and that “[i]t is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent” (Faerch et al. 1984, qtd. in Hedge 47). But as Shaw indicates, linguistic skills are not sufficient on its own.

## Language and identity

Our use of language is one of the most basic ways in establishing identity. Along with how we dress and behave, the way we talk is an essential part in how we perceive ourselves and, more importantly, how others perceive us. Our identity is in many ways imposed upon us by others in a more powerful position, and we are often not able to control the assumptions others may make about us. But the language we use can help us to identify, or distance, ourselves as members of a certain community or group. “Being able to show that you can use linguistic terms appropriately according to the norms associated with a particular group helps to establish your membership of it, both to other members of the group ... and those outside it” (Edwards 165). People tend to shift identities according to situation – different circumstances demand different roles. Identity is thus not static but a moving target open for transformation.

We live in a time where image consciousness and upward mobility are valued as fundamental and highly desirable. We see transformations taking place in different Idol, model and talent shows on TV almost every night: high school student one day, pop idol the next. Movie stars can transform into politicians, or even presidents, and a personal trainer can become a prince. Our lives are no longer pre-destined for a specific position in life – as long as we are able to transform. When Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California he literally had to put on a different suit from that of the *Terminator* and Prince Daniel of Sweden had to attend “prince school” before he could be

presented as consort to the crown princess. Today we believe that anyone can change – with the right practice.

Metamorphosis, as the one Eliza Doolittle goes through in *Pygmalion*, was a popular theme in theatres but a rare sight in real life when the play opened almost a century ago. Eliza's accent, and the hegemony of the time, destined her to a life in the gutter. When speaking Cockney, Eliza was considered unacceptable but as soon as she changed her accent, she became acceptable. But was the change all for the good?

When the embassy ball was over and Higgins had won his bet he declared: "Thank God it's over! ... No more artificial duchesses" (95). Eliza on the other hand did not feel the same. For her, the journey had only begun: "Whats [sic] to become of me?" (97) "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do?" (99) Instead of feeling empowered by her new skills and social acceptability she is rather feeling disillusioned. Although she has learned the language and ways of the upper classes she is still Eliza Doolittle from Lisson Grove. But because of her new skills she does not belong there either. In acquiring the new language she lost her old one and with that also her cultural identity. She feels as if she belongs nowhere and does no longer see the value of what she has been taught: "I wish you left me where you found me" (100). Eliza believes that the only thing she has acquired is a set of socially acceptable status symbols. In Act V she compares her newfound skills to "learning to dance in the fashionable way" (119). Unfortunately though, as Lynda Mugglestone affirms, "[i]n a modern society, ... it is precisely these superficial details which tend to be endowed with most significance, and upon which acceptability and its criteria tend to depend" (378).

The pursuit of self-identity is evident everywhere we look and anyone who has ever come in contact with adolescents know that this is a quest that occupies much of their time. Language plays a big part in the mission of separating adolescence from adulthood but also to establish group belonging. Language has historically been the strongest division of the concept *we* versus *them*, not

least by its geographical constraints. But as the world grows closer and geographical barriers are easily broken down by globalization, the way you speak no longer just reveal where you come from but also who you are. *We* and *them* consequently take on new forms.

## Chapter three: Teaching Pronunciation

In our globalized world where English is considered the lingua franca, there is no doubt of the importance of teaching English as a foreign language in our schools. The syllabus for English as a foreign language (Gy2000:16) states that the subject “aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts” (24), and continues further down: “Related to these [language skills] is the ability to master a language’s form, i.e. its vocabulary, phraseology, pronunciation, spelling and grammar” (25).

Although pronunciation *is* mentioned in the syllabus it is mentioned only as a side step, and there are no explicit goals described for this particular ability. Of course, a good pronunciation is implied in the so called “Goals to aim for” (Gy2000:16), e.g.: ” develop their ability to communicate and interact in English” (24), and we find a more specific one further down: “develop their ability to analyse, work with and improve their language in the direction of greater clarity, variation and formal accuracy” (25), but since this latter goal is situated among the goals for written proficiency it is doubtful that pronunciation is the main target here. The only time pronunciation is mentioned (except from the pretermission above) is in the grading criteria for a Pass in English A: “Pupils express themselves orally with clear and distinct pronunciation” (28). But there is obviously no goal as to take them there.

According to A.R Elliot it is widely assumed that a high level of input of the target language automatically will develop pronunciation skills; hence the Communicative Approach, with its emphasis on target language input, does not require explicit pronunciation teaching. Furthermore, research findings imply that “not teaching pronunciation in a communicative based classroom, does not result in significantly worse pronunciation” (96). It does however not improve it either.

If we want our students to have access to what the English-speaking world has to offer, “then it is

crucial for [them] to be able to understand the English of that world, and to be understood in their turn” to quote David Crystal (110). I would though argue that it is not enough to be merely understood; our students also need to be *intelligible*, to be able to interact and compete in a world with over a billion English-speaking people. That is, they need to be able to show both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency in accordance to the norm.

“Internationalism demands an agreed standard – in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation and conventions of use” (ibid). To make oneself intelligible in a globalized world one has to know all the codes of communication, both open and secret, and be willing and able to adjust according to situation. But even if you play by the rules you might be dismissed if your pronunciation is not up to part. A pronunciation that deviates from the norm may act as a disturbance on the content of what is said. Even if most people come with a positive attitude and willingness to understand, it is a tiresome and trying task to constantly have to decipher a message. A person with a good pronunciation is more likely to be taken serious and not be stereotyped by subjective inequality.

## The Teacher Role

The method for teaching pronunciation has historically been mostly *audio-lingual* which also is the technique professor Higgins uses. Lessons are conducted in the target language alone (or in the case of *Pygmalion*: target accent) and the focal point is on pronunciation, with immediate error correction, using imitation of dialogues and repetitive drills. There are very little grammar explanations, and vocabulary is learned by context only. The method leans on behaviorist theory and is still a successfully used method for highly motivated government personnel stationed abroad.

But there is little research supporting that audio-lingual methods benefit students in ordinary school programs. Instead the communicative approach has gained ground on the classroom scene. Supporters of the communicative approach believe that an insistence of correctness may stifle the motivation of the student and that it is better to encourage fluency rather than accuracy. According to

Lightbown and Spada this has though led to a deficiency of pronunciation practice and error correction. Critics therefore believe this approach could lead to early fossilization of errors instead (119). Hedge affirms this theory when discussing fluency activities: “The fundamental issue is how learners actually use the activities they are provided in order to acquire language ... There is a danger, in fact, that learners may develop [so called] ‘undesirable fluency’ with the use of convenient but incorrect forms” (60).

Hedge solution for the problem is to give students more time to prepare activities in order to focus more on accuracy. I would, however, argue that more time would not do anything to help accuracy if the error is already fossilized. Pronunciation is not a problem students may solve on their own, regardless of time constraints. The other solution Hedge makes is to record the students’ group activities and then make them compare their own language to that of the correct forms given by the teacher. This has, in my opinion, two major flaws. Firstly: to make students listen to recordings of themselves making mistakes in group could give way to subjective inequality in the classroom. There will no doubt be some students who make more mistakes than others and by playing it back these individuals will be even more targeted. However, if time and resources would allow, individual recordings and sessions would be very beneficial. Secondly: this of course acquires a flawless pronunciation by the teacher. Unfortunately this is not always the case.

In 2008, Talia Isaacs performed a study examining the pronunciation proficiency of International Teaching Assistant graduate students (ITAs) in Canada. In the study she claims: “Although pronunciation is only one of a range of factors that can affect ITAs’ abilities to carry out their instructional duties, poor pronunciation is the most overt problem” (560). This is of course a claim that speaks for itself and is applicable to all teachers of foreign languages. As a teacher you need to be intelligible in the language you are teaching for your students to have a chance to be the same. Pronunciation teaching is therefore something that I believe not only should be addressed more in

secondary and upper secondary school but also throughout the whole range of the Teacher Education program for teaching English as a foreign language.

Many textbooks in English produced for the international market avoid specific reference to phonology<sup>iv</sup> and thus leave the pronunciation part to the teacher's knowledge and good judgment. But to leave it up to the teachers is to leave it period. According to Tricia Hedge many teachers avoid pronunciation practice since they believe pronunciation work is "one of the most difficult areas for students because awkwardness, inhibition, embarrassment and fear of losing face tend to come strongly to the fore" (287). Therefore it is of most importance to create a reassuring and affirming classroom environment where the students feel that they can and want to experiment with the language and where everyone is treated equally and with respect regardless of how they speak. We are all there for the same goal – to improve our language skills, no matter on what level we begin.

### Professor Higgins as Teacher

In the original play *Pygmalion* there is not much description of how the lessons are conducted, we merely see the result of them. But we get a detailed description of how Higgins's laboratory looks like:

In [one] corner stands a flat writing-table, on which are a phonograph, a laryngoscope, a row of tiny organ pipes with a bellows, a set of lamp chimneys for singing flames with burners attached to a gas plug ... several tuning forks of different sizes, a life-size image of a human head, shewing [sic] in section the vocal organs. (29)

These artifacts show that the professor puts emphasis on the genuine production of sounds and he begins his first lesson by making Eliza repeat the alphabet and the phrase: a cup of tea.

HIGGINS. ... Say a cup of tea.

ELIZA. A cappətə-ee

HIGGINS. Put your tongue forward until it squeezes against the top of your lower teeth. Now say cup. (64)

When given a simple explanation of how to use the tongue Eliza manages to produce the correct [k]-sound in “cup” almost at first try.

In *My Fair Lady* the lessons have become a bigger part of the storyline. The vowel practice in the phrase *the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain* has become one of the most popular songs of the musical. We also get to see the described scenography come in use. The singing flame for instance is used for practicing the letter /h/: “In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen” (55). When producing the correct sound the flame will wave by the respiration: “That’s how you know you’ve done it correctly” (55). At another occasion Higgins puts marbles in Eliza’s mouth before she is to read a poem by Lord Tennyson with proper enunciation on every word. This is of course next to impossible but Higgins maintains: “If [marbles] were necessary for Demosthenes<sup>v</sup>, they are necessary for Eliza Doolittle.” (60). A xylophone is also used to display the rhythm and melody of the sentence: “How kind of you to let me come” (57).

Professor Higgins is clearly using the audio-lingual method with imitation and repetitive drills: “No use explaining ... Drilling is what she needs.” (Lerner 52), says Higgins affirming the statement, and his methods seem to pay off. But Tony Hung illustrates a problem with this approach when he declares, “imitation is greatly constrained by perception, and there is evidence that learners who are unable to produce certain phonetic distinctions are also unlikely to be able to perceive them” (150). Higgins seems aware of this fact in his statement: “Well if you can hear that difference, what the devil are you crying for?” (Shaw 65).

This is of course something teachers need to be aware of and work on with the students. A test focusing on the perception of different phonetic distinctions would be of great help in determining which sounds to put emphasis on in pronunciation teaching. Today when there might be many different first languages in a class this is even more important. Different languages have different

problems in acquiring the sounds and prosody of the same foreign language and teachers need to be aware of these difficulties. A perception test would thus be a first step towards coming to terms with how to plan pronunciation practice.

Hung argues that modern teachers of phonetics would not be impressed by professor Higgins and that he is relying his teaching on imitation alone (150) but as my quoted examples above show there is actually more to it than that. Higgins uses both explanation and practice of articulatory settings (tongue placement and marbles), self-correcting devices (the singing flame), and musical instruments (the xylophone). All of which, in a modified version, I believe would be of assistance in the modern classroom as well.

Tony Hung describes professor Higgins as “the very antithesis of all that modern education stands for” (150), and that is true in regards to the relationship between teacher and student. The interaction between Higgins and Eliza is not a favorable relationship today. A declaration like: “if you ever say bə-yee cə-yee də-yee again you shall be dragged around the room three times by the hair of your head” (Shaw 65) would probably lead to a lawsuit and eventually to a dismissal. The subjective inequality, eminent in the degrading name-calling, and the very much teacher-centered classroom of *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*, is changed towards a more equal and student-centered scene in schools today. Now, we put effort into making our students think for themselves and want them to be self-sufficient. Professor Higgins did the opposite: “You will jolly soon see whether [Eliza] has an idea that I havnt [sic] put into her head or a word that I havnt [sic] put into her mouth. I tell you I have created this thing out of the squashed cabbage leaves of Covent Garden” (Shaw 118).

### *Pygmalion* in the Classroom

There are many ways one could use this play in the classroom. In regards to this essay the primary target is of course pronunciation. The play is an excellent example of the difficulty of understanding

and pronouncing different accents. Using the audio-lingual method one could let students mimic and repeat Eliza's Cockney utterances, undoubtedly not without much laughter in the classroom. The way it is presented in the play as an ugly accent, gives way for the students to really go all in and embellish the words with ugliness. This then opens up for a more vivid rendering of the RP accent of Professor Higgins as well. To exaggerate the differences in an overly dramatic way make the students remember them more and really feel the diversity between the two. This way they also register the difference from their own English-speaking accent but without explicitly exposing themselves.

These pronunciation exercises may well lead to discussions about intelligibility. Is it important to be able to make oneself understood? What accent is the more understandable, and why is that? What features distinct one from the other? Can they point out features in their own accent that are similar to, or different from, those of the play? By letting the students try to decipher Eliza's: "Ow, eez yə-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' d ə-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran away athaht pyin"<sup>vi</sup> (Shaw 14), they will find out the importance of an intelligible pronunciation for themselves. And by looking at the distinct Cockney features, such as the shifted diphthongs in words like day [dei] sounding like die [dai], and glottal stops instead of [t], and the h-dropping in 'Enry Iggins' for example, makes the students aware that different types of English come with different linguistic features. Working like this promotes "a metalinguistic awareness based on interlingual allophonic and phonemic similarities and differences as well as an awareness of the grapheme-phoneme relationship" (Elliot 97).

Using Henry Higgins line about the tongue placement in the word *cup*, students become attentive of the fact that different articulatory settings produce different sounds. Swedish people are brought up with English speaking TV and radio shows and tend to have little problems with English phonemes and the correlation between grapheme and phoneme but there are certain sounds that are difficult such as /th/ and /z/. This is a perfect opportunity to use tongue placement in order to practice the correct

sound. There is a distinct difference between the tongue placement when producing [ð]/[θ] and the way many Swedes pronounce it as [d]. The best thing would be if there was a supply of pocket mirrors for every student as well so that they could see how they place their tongue and not just feel it.

Students may work in groups and discuss their opinion on where the sound is supposed to articulate in the mouth. They can also draw facial diagrams on where they believe the tongue should be placed and so forth. What is the difference between *eyes* and *ice*, *they* and *think*? What makes the different sounds come about? To put objects like marbles in your mouth is also changing the way you are able to articulate and as a consequence you practice the muscles in both mouth cavity and larynx, hence you will be able to produce more, and more distinctive sounds. Exercises like these appeal to different preferences and learning styles than regular textbook activities often do.

Mimicking both the Cockney and RP accents is also a good practice for voice quality and articulatory settings. Acting the scenes of *Pygmalion* gives plenty of opportunity of trying to mimic pronunciation on both word level and sentence level. And since *My Fair Lady* is a musical you also have an obvious opportunity to use music and singing in the practice of pronunciation. It is sometimes easier to enunciate correctly when singing than when speaking. As with Higgins's xylophone exercise, singing also facilitates suprasegmental aspects such as stress and syllable practice since the intonation of words and sentences is following the rhythm and melody of the song. If using the target language at all times it is still a communicative based classroom even if the focus is on form. Collie and Slater also points out that “availability of a variety of activities enables the teacher to concentrate on meeting students’ weaknesses in particular skill areas” (8).

Hedge’s suggestion to “discuss explicitly with students what is needed for effective speaking in English” (271), could be applied by using the tea-party scene of Act III. What made the Eynsford Hills buy the charade and what made Mrs. Higgins expose it? The value of communicative competence and communicative equality will be addressed. And thus the question of whether form surpass function or vice versa. This scene also enables questions about transformation and the need to

fit in. Are the superficial details, the pronunciation and the clothing, enough to fit in? Is it important to fit in?

As a logical consequence the play thus also facilitates discussions of intrinsic worth and equality for all. Why should pronunciation or social class matter? Zuidema points out that “judgments about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ language use are subjective social constructions” (671) and we need to make our students aware of that. Awareness that we all make value judgments based on superficialities is the only way to reduce prejudice. For this purpose students may conduct critical research of attitudes in media and the entertainment industry to uncover linguistic prejudice in our everyday life. A conclusive discussion about the power of education is then suitable. Is education really the answer? Why does Eliza in that case feel disillusioned when she has graduated with a high pass? Are you worried about life after school?

## Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that the teaching of pronunciation in English as a foreign language is something we need to address more if we want our students to be intelligible and not just settle on being understood. Swedish people have long been considered to have a mainly presentable pronunciation of English but I would claim that this has little to do with the teaching of English as a foreign language. This is instead a product of the vast opportunities of listening to spoken English in our medialized world. The simple fact that we, for example, use subtitles instead of dubbing English-speaking shows, makes a difference in the acquisition of the language, compared to countries that do not. It is, nonetheless, my firm belief that schools today depend too much on the media to do the work and thus relax in the ways of teaching pronunciation, while the Eastern countries do just the opposite (Hung 2003, Chiu 2008).

Swedish language, phonemes and articulatory settings are quite similar to that of the English language and we consequently have an advantage in pronunciation correctness compared to other languages that differs in such aspects. But since many of our students today speak another mother tongue than Swedish, we need to start considering these aspects as well. If we do not, we will be at great jeopardy of creating inequality where there need not to be. All students, despite origin and articulatory benefits, have the right to get the tools to compete on equal terms.

Physically, speech is sound produced by our lungs, larynx, mouth cavity, tongue, nose cavity and lips (Cerú ed. 204). Our physical equipment decides what types of sounds we are able to produce. Different languages use partly different sounds and different prosody. To use correct sounds and prosody for the target language is significant for an intelligible pronunciation. The communicative approach has led to a shift of emphasis in the teaching of pronunciation, from segmental to suprasegmental aspects of speech. That is, it focuses more on sentence stress, rhythm and intonation

than on individual sounds. I argue that we need to address both and that one thing does not exclude the other. Speaking a foreign language is similar to singing. Anyone can sing but it is only those who have perfect pitch that make people want to listen.

In *Svenska som andraspråk* it is stated that listening to a person with a bad pronunciation is equivalent to listening to a radio with bad reception. It is doable but it takes a lot of effort and eventually it gets tiresome (202). An unintelligible pronunciation is frustrating on both listener and speaker's part. To be understood and taken seriously, however, makes your confidence grow and makes it easier to interact with other people and as a result you get more opportunities to develop your language even further.

Eliza Doolittle manages to replace her Cockney with a more socially acceptable accent that gives her access to the upper classes. One could choose to read *Pygmalion* as a Cinderella story, from rags to riches, but the play is more complicated than that. Linguistic inequality and prejudice work as both determiner and determinant, both cause and consequence. Shaw wants us to see behind "the superficial issues that obscure such knowledge" (Mugglestone 377). The dirt and the accent are easily removed from Eliza and the play thus suggests that markers of class are overstated as determining factors of identity. "Equality and inequality in social terms are thereby proven to be both extrinsic and subjective" (Mugglestone 379). Eliza's statement affirms this: "You see, really and truly, apart from the things that anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated" (Shaw 120).

Eliza's account of what really makes a difference has become the subject matter of the term *Pygmalion effect*, created by the American psychologist Robert Rosenthal. In 1965 Rosenthal conducted an experiment that revealed how our preconceptions, thoughts and attitudes toward other people make them perform accordingly. He assigned a random selection of students a high score on a non-existing test and another selection of random students a low score. The experiment was to see if

the teacher's expectations on those particular students changed. It did, and what is worse the students' falsely assigned scores became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pollack 29-30). The power a teacher possesses is almost frightening and it is with utmost respect and responsibility we need to approach our students.

I agree with Lynda Mugglestone when she says that *Pygmalion* is “not only a paradigm of social mobility but also a paean to inherent equality with its thesis ... that a lady is only a flower-girl with six months phonetic training” (373). This is more a consideration of the nature of equality than a proposal for phonetics as the solution for class-based problems but at the same time you cannot avoid reading the play as a celebration to the power of education. Even if Eliza feels disillusioned when not knowing where to belong when her education is complete, I fall in with Lily Porten in her statement that “it is hard to conclude that Eliza would have been better off staying in the gutter” (83).

In this essay I have given examples on how to implement Higgins methods in the pronunciation teaching of today. The communicative approach does not have to exclude focus on form to stay communicative. I hope that this essay has rather shown the opposite. Although Higgins's statement that he is the *creator* of Eliza is blunt and self-righteous, I dare say he has a point in taking credit for Eliza's development. Without him leading the way Eliza would surely not have been a success at the Embassy ball. Teachers today are maybe a bit too afraid to see the potential of their own teaching and too timid to take credit for progress in the classroom. “In drawing an analogy between the phonetics teacher and the mythological Pygmalion, ... [Shaw] affirms that education is indeed a quasi-magical force” (Porten 72). Maybe an “energetic phonetic enthusiast” is what we need in teaching English as a foreign language as well.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Quotations in this essay from Shaw's added preface of *Pygmalion* are cited from Bartleby.com since the preface in the Pocket Books publication was edited at a later stage.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1925 Shaw received the Nobel Prize in Literature making him the only person both with an Academy Award and a Nobel Prize.

<sup>iii</sup> A Yorkshire TV play was produced in 1981 on ITV, based on the original play, with Twiggy as Eliza and Robert Powell as Higgins. Rumor has it there are plans of a movie remake of *My Fair Lady* in 2012 with Emma Thompson as screenwriter and starring Carey Mulligan as Eliza.

<sup>iv</sup> The lack of phonetics and phonology in textbooks produced for an international market could partly be explained by the many variants of Standard English in the world today. In this way the same textbook can be used all over the world despite different Standards.

<sup>v</sup> In the ancient world the Greek Demosthenes is said to have put pebbles in his mouth to overcome his speech impediments.

<sup>vi</sup> ["Oh he's your son is he? Well if you had done your duty by him as a mother should, he would know better than to spoil a poor girl's flower and then run away without paying."]

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