To start with, English is not a phonetic language – many words are pronounced very differently from how they are written and this is one of the first aspects of learning that Romanian teachers of EFL outline at the beginning of any course. Every teacher is aware, often resentfully so, of the existence of phonetics and all books on method as well as training courses dwell, even if not always overtly, on the necessity for teachers to be phoneticians, too. Phonetic symbols represent the sounds of the English language and using them can be a valuable tool to improving students’ pronunciation. According to Peter Roach there are 44 such symbols and they stand for the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and are also used to represent the ‘BBC accent’ of English or the ‘Received Pronunciation’.

In order for students to overcome many of the pronunciation problems they have, the answer that would logically come to one’s mind is for teachers to teach the phonetic symbols used in the English language. However such an approach may only prove confusing and counterproductive in the case of beginner students who have only just been introduced to the alphabet in their native language and would find it difficult to cope with the extra 44 phonetic symbols, even if some of these have the same sound and shape as the letters in their alphabet. For this reason the Romanian curriculum for EFL does not include teaching phonetic symbols at beginner and elementary levels although young students are made aware of the English sounds, of the difference between long and short vowel sounds, of the pronunciation for the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ etc.

Many methodologists have tried to deal with this aspect of teaching pronunciation. Thus, in her book *Teaching Pronunciation*, Marianne Celce-Murcia distinguishes between: an *intuitive-imitative* approach to learning pronunciation and an *analytic-linguistic* one. According to M. C-Murcia an intuitive-imitative approach ‘depends on the learner’s ability to imitate the rhythms and the sounds of the target language without the intervention of any explicit information; it also presupposes the availability of good models to listen to, a possibility that has been enhanced by the availability first of phonographs records, then of tape recorders and language laboratories in the mid-twentieth century, and more recently of audio- and videocassettes and compact discs’. On the other hand, an analytic-linguistic approach ‘utilizes information and tools such as a phonetic alphabet, articulatory descriptions, charts of the vocal apparatus, contrastive information and other aids to supplement listening, imitation and production’. In view of this distinction it is safe to say that EFL teachers resort
to an intuitive-imitative approach with beginners and only with intermediate learners does their approach become analytically-linguistic. In other words, the amount of phonetic knowledge is age-dependent, young learners need guiding, less theory and lots of pronunciation practice, whereas ‘older’ learners need, besides practice, informing on other aspects of phonetics too, such as stress or intonation. It is needless to say that pronunciation must be learnt in parallel with meaning and use for every word.

Therefore, the main reasons for using phonetic symbols are:
1. they help students use dictionaries effectively: the second item of information in any monolingual English dictionary is the word in phonetic symbols;
2. students can become independent learners: they can find out the pronunciation of a word by themselves without asking the teacher;
3. phonetic symbols are arranged in a chart; at intermediate levels and above, most textbooks include a phonetic alphabet. Just as they have a grammar table for grammar and a word store for vocabulary, students need reference material for pronunciation too: the phonetic symbols are simple, key words that show the sound of each symbol.

As already stated, pronunciation is an area of great difficulty for the EFL teacher. To a large extent, EFL students have problems with pronunciation mainly due to the fact that their native tongue may not have a particular sound. Romanian students, for example, particularly find it difficult to pronounce the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ as there is no equivalent for these two sounds in the Romanian alphabet.

It is also possible for a student to have a good understanding of English and an excellent vocabulary but if their pronunciation is so poor that they cannot make themselves understood, all is lost. Students need to hear natural, fast and relaxed pronunciation not a carefully over-articulated word-by-word phrasing of sentences. Speaking unnaturally is a disadvantage for students for two main reasons: they will imitate the teacher’s style of speaking and thus speak unnaturally too and also they will not recognize and understand natural, rapid speech when they hear it.

Bibliography:
M. Celce-Murcia, Donna M. Brinton, Janet M Goodwin, Teaching Pronunciation- A Reference for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, University Press, 1996

Peter Roach, Phonetics, Oxford University Press, 2001