

THE USE OF ELECTRONIC DICTIONARIES FOR PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE BY UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how Slovak learners of English use electronic dictionaries with regard to pronunciation practice and improvement. A total of 24 Slovak university students (subjects) completed a questionnaire which contained pronunciation-related questions in connection with the use of electronic dictionaries. The questions primarily concerned electronic editions of monolingual learner's dictionaries, dictionaries intended for native speakers, and specialized (special-purpose) pronunciation dictionaries. The main objective of this small-scale study was to identify the frequency, manner, and types of electronic dictionaries used by the subjects in order to practice and improve their pronunciation. The findings indicate that the subjects of the study use electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice relatively often, learner's dictionaries being the most preferred choice. The study also recommends that EFL learners exploit the pronunciation conveniences of electronic dictionaries extensively.

Keywords: electronic dictionary; online dictionary; English pronunciation, pronunciation practice; university student; EFL learner

1. Introduction

“Learning vocabulary is crucial in mastering a foreign language as it is a backbone of any language” (Vasbieva, Klimova, Agibalov, Karzhanova, Bírová, 2016, p. 1196). Pronunciation of a particular word is something EFL (English as a foreign language) learners need to know about when they have actually learned the new word; therefore, it is of immense importance since it plays a major role in communication, and mispronunciation may result in communication breakdowns. Giba and Ribes (2011) explain that English pronunciation appears to be a rather difficult aspect for most non-native speakers because its phonological system is quite complex, and somewhat differs from the majority of European languages. Moreover, this language system is frequently neglected because teachers themselves may regard their knowledge of this area as insufficient, or they are unsure about the quality of their own pronunciation (Brown, 2014). However, if the teachers take the risk of teaching this language system, they may feel rather surprised how enjoyable and useful classroom work it

is (Scrivener, 2011).

Nowadays, English as a second language or English as a foreign language learners have, among other technological advancements, electronic dictionaries at their disposal. These ought to facilitate teaching and learning pronunciation (particularly on a segmental level) as they offer a wide range of handy features. Therefore, learners of English have been recently provided with new opportunities for pronunciation practice. However, the question arises as to whether or not the learners of English use electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice. This article attempts to throw more light on this matter since relatively little research has been conducted in the area of practicing and improving pronunciation through electronic dictionaries, especially as far as the frequency of use is concerned. Furthermore, electronic dictionaries, offering numerous conveniences (including pronunciation features), have become an inseparable part of the learning process of a learner and hence deserve fairly careful attention of teachers and researchers.

The purpose of this article is:

- to discover the frequency of using electronic dictionaries to practice pronunciation by Slovak university students (subjects);
- to examine what type of electronic dictionaries the subjects use for pronunciation practice;
- to explore the manner of practicing pronunciation concerning electronic dictionaries.

2. Types of (electronic) dictionaries

Using a dictionary has become an inseparable and indispensable part of successful language learning, and the digital era we live in makes dictionaries, particularly the electronic ones, readily and easily available to the vast majority of EFL learners.

Zykova (2008) explains that all linguistic dictionaries belong to two categories according to the information they provide: explanatory dictionaries and specialized (special-purpose) dictionaries. A good explanatory (monolingual) dictionary contains useful and valuable information; it does not merely provide definitions of entries, but it also supplies its users with information on grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation particulars (Ingels, 2006).

Carter (2012) indicates that it is important to differentiate between monolingual dictionaries for native speakers such as *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2003) or *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) and monolingual dictionaries for second or foreign language learners such as *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2014) or

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015). Dictionaries for EFL learners are written explicitly for non-native speakers and hence contain simpler definitions in comparison to the definitions found in monolingual dictionaries intended for native speakers. Furthermore, the learner's dictionaries lay a stronger emphasis on vocabulary and aspects which may be difficult for the learners of English (Meyer, 2009).

Specialized dictionaries concern the lexical unit only in relation to some of their features, such as etymology, usage, frequency, or pronunciation (Zykova, 2008). As far as pronunciation is concerned, *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Roach, Setter, Esling, 2011) and *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (Wells, 2008) are the typical representatives of specialized (pronunciation) dictionaries. Such dictionaries offer more information on pronunciation phenomena such as graphs demonstrating the preferred pronunciation by British and American speakers, essays on various aspects of pronunciation, searching for a word according to phonetic symbols, etc.

The questionnaire which was designed for this study includes explanatory and special-purpose dictionary questions. As far as the explanatory dictionaries are concerned, both types are included in the questionnaire. The reason for this is that learner's dictionaries such as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2015), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014), or *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2013) seem to be rather popular among EFL learners (Metruk, 2016). However, dictionaries designed for English native speakers may also be used by L2 learners, especially by students who have already achieved a good command of L2, and aim to become proficient users of English. Therefore, dictionaries intended for the native speakers of English were included in the questionnaire too.

3. Electronic dictionaries and pronunciation

Electronic dictionaries appear to be a useful tool for practicing and improving pronunciation. "An electronic dictionary has the potential to provide an instant access from within a given entry to a key to the symbols used in the relevant phonological transcription and also, at the click of a button, to model the pronunciation of any given word in audio mode" (Singleton, 2016, p. 208). Therefore, English learners can actually see, hear, and model the pronunciation of any word within seconds, when working with electronic and online editions of modern dictionaries. Moreover, the dictionaries typically offer pronunciation of the two most widely taught pronunciation varieties: BBC pronunciation (Standard British Pronunciation) and General American (Standard American Pronunciation). Thus, EFL learners can hear how the

words and phrases are pronounced in the variety they speak (or wish to speak) themselves, and they also have an opportunity to notice the essential difference between the BBC and GA accents. Another noteworthy feature which deserves attention is the possibility to record one's own pronunciation of a word and compare it to the pronunciation in a dictionary. However, this feature is normally available only on CD-ROM/DVD-ROM editions of electronic dictionaries.

Several studies on pronunciation in regard to electronic dictionaries have been carried out, largely indicating that EFL learners do not feel highly enthusiastic about using electronic dictionaries for pronunciation. Alfallaj (2013) indicates that an electronic dictionary is one of the media which helps students with pronunciation as nearly 60% of the subjects claimed that they use electronic dictionaries also for pronunciation. According to Kent (2001), half of the respondents in his study claimed that audio pronunciation was the most useful feature of electronic dictionaries. However, respondents which participated in other studies suggest that they use audio pronunciation to a low degree (Zheng & Wang, 2016). The experiment conducted by Weschler and Pitts (2000) also indicates that subjects' enthusiasm for hearing the pronunciation in an electronic dictionary was not great. While a few respondents regarded this feature as very important, the overwhelming majority considered this function as "somewhat important" or "not important". Moreover, only few respondents had any intention of repeating the words they have just acquired. Similarly, the study of Dashtestani (2013) demonstrates that EFL students scarcely or never listen to the pronunciation of words, and rarely check the phonetics of a dictionary entry. Another study by Alhaisoni (2016) shows that the majority of learners check dictionaries for word meaning and spelling, but devote little attention to other information such as pronunciation. Finally, according to Dwaik (2015), only 20% of students use the electronic dictionaries in the context of speaking (pronunciation being an inseparable part of the speaking skills), what might seem fairly strange as it was pronunciation which posed problems for the subjects who participated in the study, and electronic dictionaries would apparently prove helpful in this respect.

To summarize, it appears that EFL learners are predominantly concerned with other aspects of electronic dictionaries rather than dealing with pronunciation features. EFL learners have a large number of dictionaries at their disposal in this day and age. Special attention needs to be devoted to electronic dictionaries which are developing rapidly due to the digital era we live in. It is reasonable to assume that the features electronic dictionaries have should possibly facilitate pronunciation teaching and learning, and result in improved pronunciation.

4. The study

4.1. The objective of the study

The aim of the study is to discover whether and how frequently students use electronic dictionaries with regard to pronunciation practice and improvement. Furthermore, the study attempts to examine which types of electronic dictionaries (out of the various types discussed in section 2) are used for pronunciation practice. Finally, the manner of pronunciation practice is explored in order to discover how the subjects actually exploit electronic dictionaries.

4.2. Participants

The participants were 24 full-time university students of a bachelor study programme Teaching English Language at a Slovak university. On average, they were 21 years of age, and their level of English was at B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The L1 of all the subjects was Slovak.

4.3. Data collection and procedure

A questionnaire was implemented as a research instrument in order to obtain the data about the use of electronic dictionaries to improve and practice pronunciation. The questionnaire consisted of 7 multiple-choice statements and was distributed in English. It was anonymous in order to improve the response rate and the validity of gathered data.

5. Results and discussion

Question 1: *I use electronic/online learner's dictionaries (such as Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary etc.) to practice or improve my pronunciation (circle one option).*

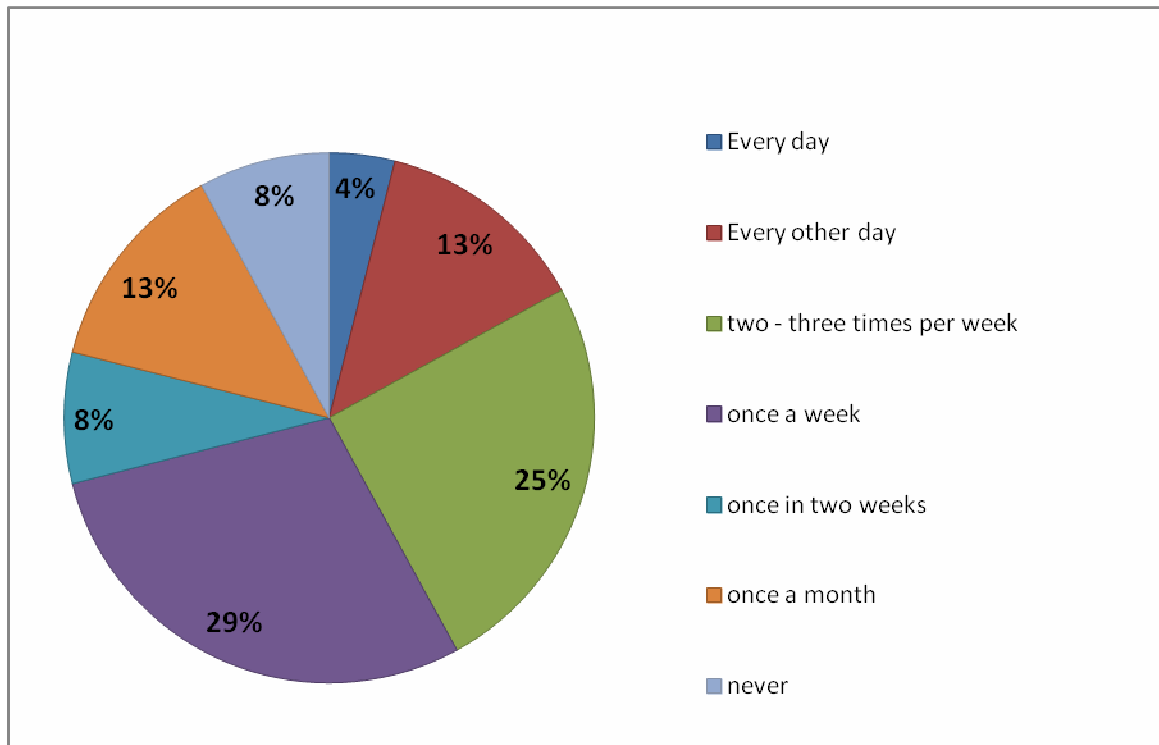


Figure 1. The frequency of using electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of use of electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice expressed as a percentage. The results, ranked in the descending order, demonstrate that 7 subjects (29%) used online electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice once a week, 6 subjects (25%) two – three times a week, 3 subjects (13%) every other day, 3 subjects (13%) once a month, 2 subjects (8%) once in two weeks, 2 subjects (8%) did not use the dictionaries for pronunciation practice at all, and 1 subject (4%) used them on a daily basis.

Surprisingly, only one subject exploited electronic dictionaries every day, which means that electronic dictionaries as such might not represent the most frequently used way of pronunciation practice. The data indicate that Slovak university students are more likely to practice pronunciation by means of electronic dictionaries two to three times a week or once a week.

Question 2: *For pronunciation practice, I use the following types of electronic/online dictionaries (you can circle more options).*

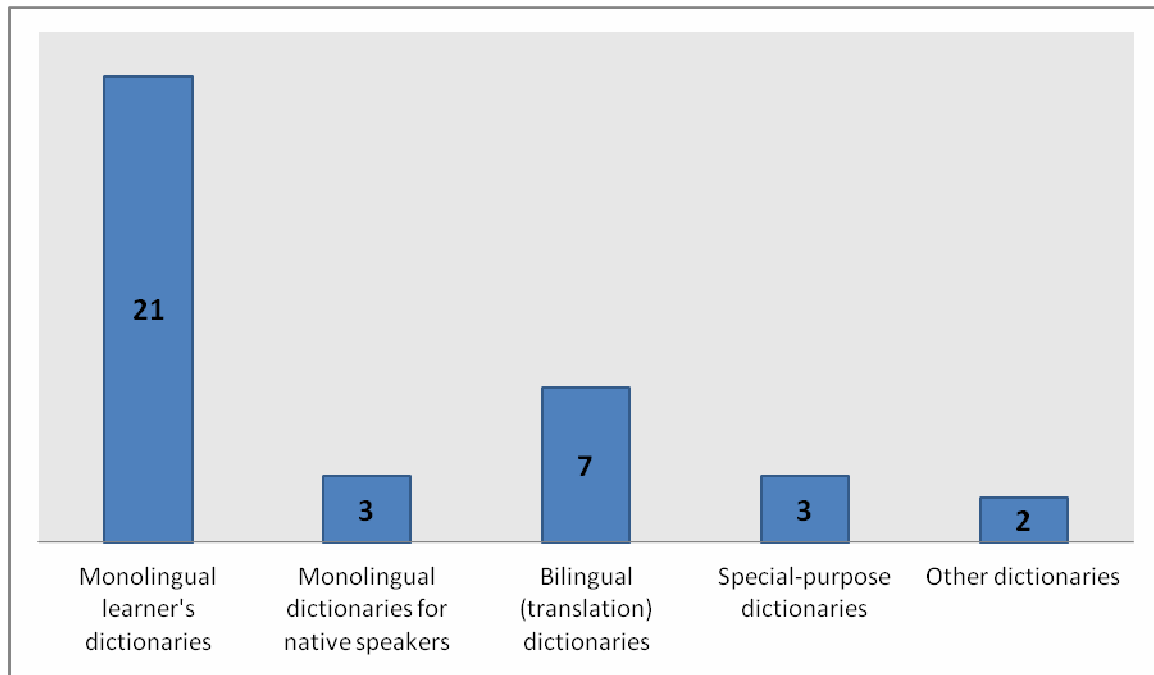


Figure 2. Types of electronic dictionaries used for pronunciation practice

The types of electronic dictionaries identified by the subjects are displayed in Figure 2. The use of monolingual electronic learner's dictionaries was marked 21 times, followed by bilingual translation electronic dictionaries – 7 times. Monolingual electronic dictionaries intended for native speakers, specialized electronic dictionaries, and other electronic dictionaries (unspecified electronic dictionaries for handheld devices) were identified to a lesser degree – 3, 3, and 2 times respectively.

The majority of subjects regard monolingual learner's dictionaries as a primary source of pronunciation practice. It appears that learner's dictionaries still remain overwhelmingly popular with EFL learners as they are specifically designed for non-native speakers. Therefore, they are carefully tailored to meet the needs of L2 learners. 29% of the subjects found bilingual translation dictionaries appealing in terms of pronunciation practice, perhaps because they can also see the translation of a word (translation dictionaries have always been popular with EFL learners as far as learning vocabulary is concerned). In spite of the fact that the subjects were university students whose major was English Language Teaching, a relatively low number of subjects used either special-purpose dictionaries or monolingual dictionaries intended for native speakers to practice pronunciation. Finally, only 2 subjects used other (unspecified) electronic dictionaries installed in their handheld devices to improve their pronunciation.

Question 3: *When I check a word in electronic/online dictionaries, I also check its pronunciation (circle one option).*

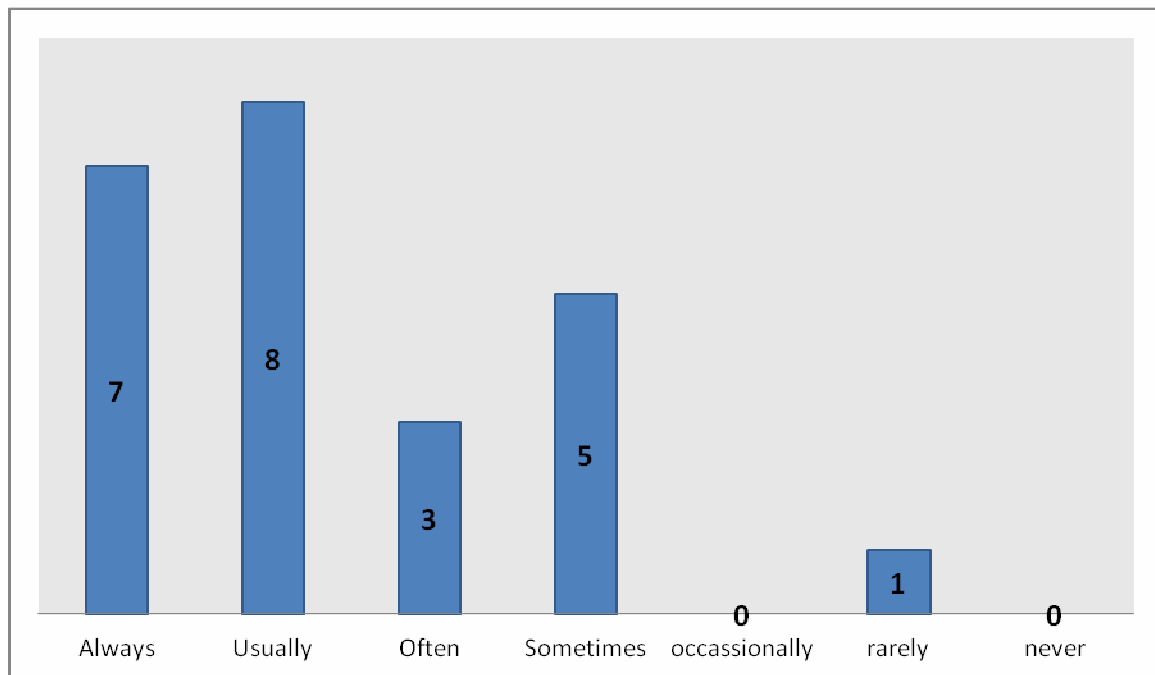


Figure 3. Checking the pronunciation of a word when the word itself is checked

Figure 3 shows the frequency of checking the pronunciation of a word when the word itself is checked. This procedure was always followed by 7 subjects, usually by 8 subjects, and often by 3 subjects. Five of them checked the pronunciation sometimes, and only 1 subject did it rarely.

On the whole, it seems that the subjects do not neglect the pronunciation of words when they check them in an electronic dictionary. EFL learners have to understand that when learning a new word they ought to devote special attention to pronunciation, because if they learn incorrect pronunciation of a word, it might be difficult for them to get rid of it in the future. Moreover, intelligibility may be negatively influenced. Similarly, when checking a word which might not be completely new to EFL learners, they are still advised to ensure their familiarity with the appropriate pronunciation of such a word.

Question 4: *When I check the pronunciation of a word, I do it by doing the following (circle one option).*

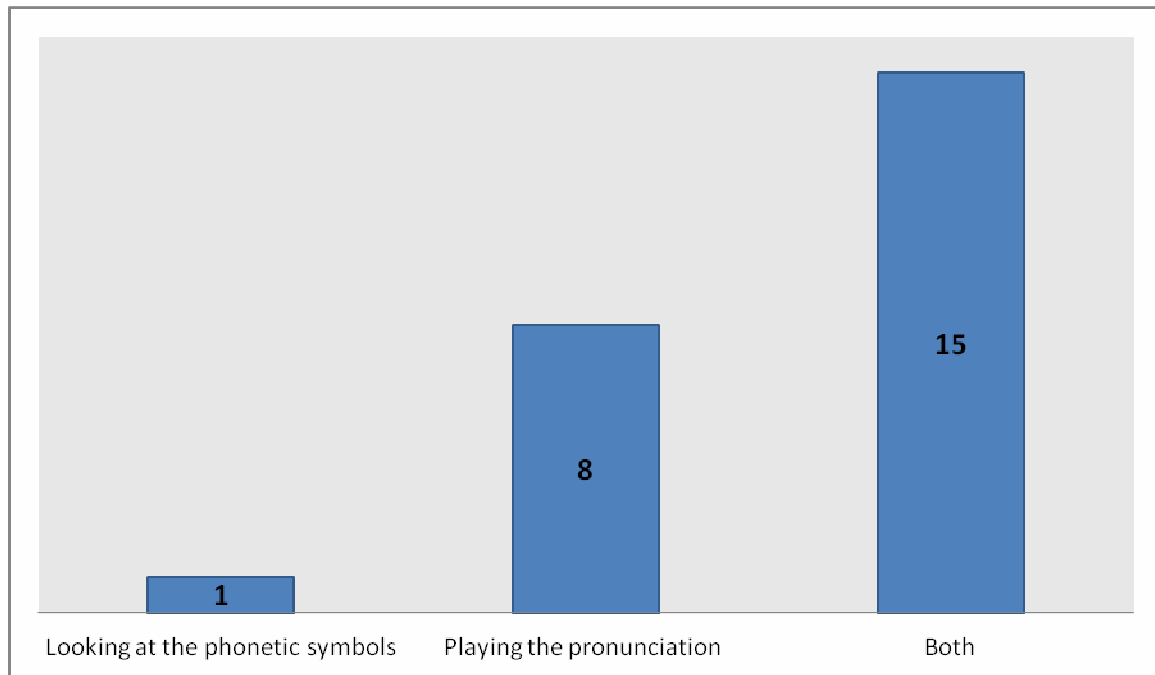


Figure 4. The manner of checking the pronunciation of a word

Figure 4 demonstrates that 1 subject used merely phonetic symbols as a way of checking pronunciation, 8 subjects did it by playing the pronunciation of a word, and most of them (15) both looked at the phonetic symbols and played the pronunciation of a word.

The use of phonetic symbols regarding pronunciation instruction has always been a hotly debated issue. One of the solutions was that L2 learners should only be able to read the phonetic symbols in order to check the pronunciation in paper dictionaries (perhaps it did not seem necessary for them to use the symbols actively). However, modern electronic dictionaries provide L2 learners with the audio pronunciation of both BBC and GA accents. Thus, EFL learners can, at a click of a button, hear and model the L2 pronunciation without the necessity of reading phonetic symbols. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that 63% of the subjects checked the pronunciation by both looking at the phonetic symbols and playing the pronunciation of a word.

Question 5: I repeat the pronunciation of a word when I have clicked the play button and heard how the word should be pronounced (circle one option).

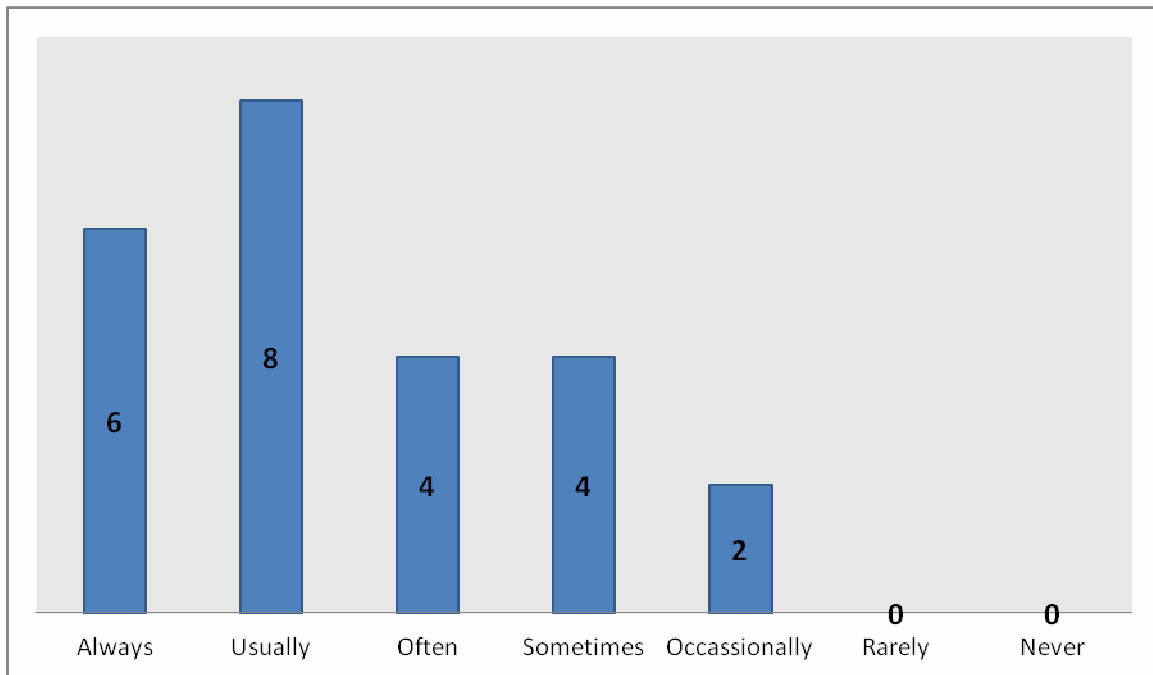


Figure 5. Repeating the pronunciation of a word

Figure 5 demonstrates how frequently the subjects repeat the pronunciation of words after they have heard it in an electronic dictionary. It can be concluded that the subjects do repeat the pronounced word to a greater or lesser degree. Repeating the pronunciation of words might be a useful way of practicing and improving one's pronunciation, which increases the possibility of pronouncing the words properly and appropriately. Therefore, EFL learners should be encouraged to perform the act of repetition when they come across either new or already known words.

Question 6: *When I check pronunciation of a word, I check (circle one option).*

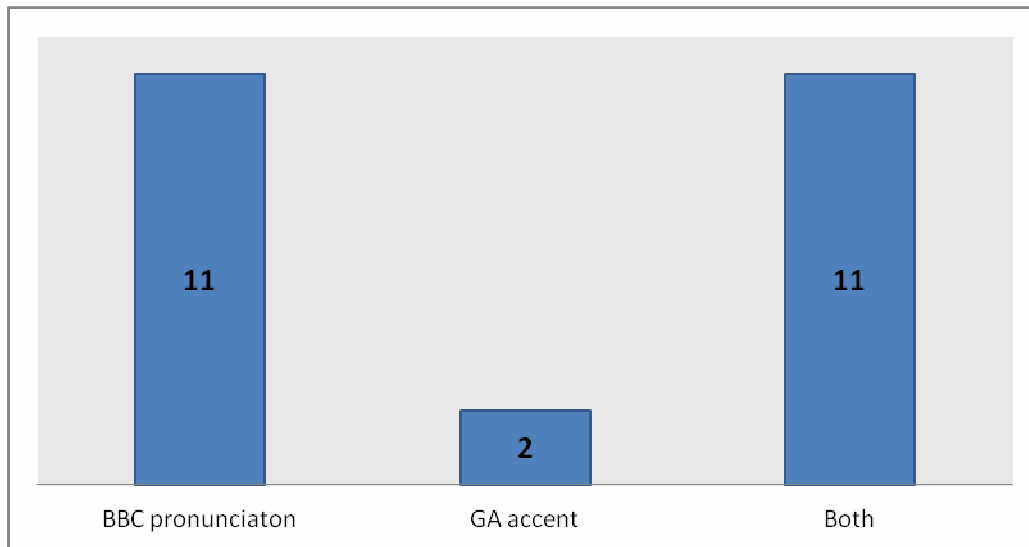


Figure 6. Pronunciation variety

According to Figure 6, only 2 subjects checked how words are pronounced in the GA accent, 11 of them paid attention to BBC pronunciation, and the remaining 11 subjects checked both accents. Slovak learners of English are typically taught from British textbooks, hence the prevalence of Standard British Pronunciation variety among the subjects. Nonetheless, 46% of them also explored the GA accent, which shows that Slovak learners of English also seem to be interested in Standard American accent, possibly due to the considerable influence of the US entertainment industry.

Question 7: *I use electronic/online specialized (special-purpose) dictionaries (for example Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary or Longman Pronunciation Dictionary) to practice or improve my pronunciation (circle one option).*

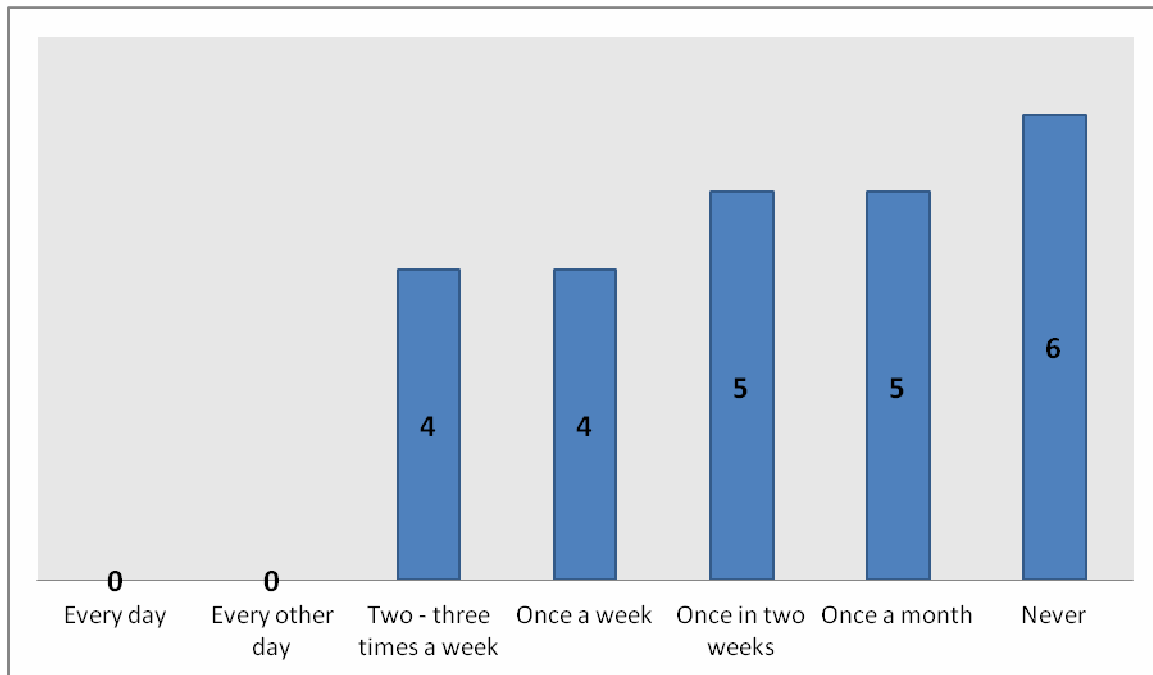


Figure 7. The use of specialized pronunciation dictionaries

Figure 7 shows that none of the subjects used special-purpose dictionaries every day or every other day. Four subjects used them two to three times a week, 4 once a week, 5 once in two weeks, and 5 once a month. Interestingly, 6 subjects never used special-purpose electronic dictionaries. It seems reasonable to assume that monolingual learner's dictionaries typically offer adequate amount of information on pronunciation, and special-purpose dictionaries are possibly used to a greater extent by more advanced learners with increased interest in pronunciation.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This small-scale study investigated how and to what degree various types of electronic dictionaries are used for pronunciation practice by Slovak university students whose major is English.

As far as the frequency of using electronic dictionaries for practicing pronunciation is concerned, the study indicates that the subjects use the dictionaries for pronunciation practice fairly often. Therefore, it can be concluded that the subjects feel quite interested in using electronic dictionaries for pronunciation practice. Moreover, it should be also noted that this finding is not concordant with the findings in similar studies which have been conducted in this field as the majority of them suggest that EFL learners do not feel particularly enthusiastic about using electronic dictionaries for pronunciation purposes.

The results demonstrate that the subjects primarily use monolingual electronic learner's dictionaries for pronunciation practice. Such dictionaries are explicitly designed for EFL learners so that they can suit their needs. It seems that special-purpose dictionaries have not achieved the popularity of monolingual learner's dictionaries. However, it should be stressed that the monolingual learner's dictionaries can be generally regarded as sufficient for L2 learners, and that specialized pronunciation dictionaries possibly attract the attention of the students who are keenly interested in English phonetics and wish to achieve a relatively advanced command of the English pronunciation.

The subjects have a tendency to check the pronunciation of a word when the word itself is checked, and most of them do it by both looking at the phonetic symbols and listening to the pronunciation of the word. Furthermore, the students are likely to repeat the correct pronunciation and usually check either BBC variety only, or both BBC and GA accents. This finding is also inconsistent with other findings carried out in this research area which indicate that L2 learners are hardly likely to check the phonetics of an entry and repeat the pronunciation of a word.

To summarize, electronic dictionaries have secured their place within pronunciation instruction as they seem to have become an effective tool in practicing and improving the pronunciation of EFL learners. The results reveal that EFL learners have become fairly interested in practicing their pronunciation through modern electronic dictionaries. These outcomes, however, cannot be generalized as the sample consisted of a relatively small number of subjects. Therefore, conducting the study on a larger number of respondents might be of considerable benefit to the field of EFL pronunciation in regard to electronic dictionaries.

The pedagogical implications arising out of the questionnaire results offer two recommendations. Firstly, taking all the pronunciation conveniences of electronic dictionaries along with their potential benefits into account, EFL learners ought to be advised to use them to an even larger degree with increased frequency. Secondly, EFL teachers should realize that modern electronic dictionaries constitute a powerful tool not only for enlarging one's vocabulary, but also for pronunciation practice, and that the electronic dictionaries indeed represent a vital part of the language learning process.

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