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Polish learners' self-assessment and reflections on their pronunciation progress

Abstract

The aim of this pilot study is to describe, analyse and interpret the outcome of a pronunciation self-assessment task carried out by Polish learners of English at an academic level and their reflections on progress and what they believe they need in order to feel more successful as speakers of English in terms of pronunciation. It also attempts to discuss certain individual factors determining the perceptions of the learners' performance. Seventeen Polish first-year university students of English philology were asked to assess their improvement in the production of individual English sounds based on two recording sessions that they had undergone at the beginning and at the end of the academic year, i.e. before and after a two-semester pronunciation course. The results of the students' assessment were then compared with the teacher's assessment. All of the participants were recorded reading a diagnostic passage which concentrates on examining individual segments of Standard British English (SBE). They were also asked a number of questions in the form of an open-ended questionnaire related to their attitudes and feelings towards certain mispronunciations and general performance in the two recording sessions, how they perceive the way they speak English, their opinions as to the most effective techniques and activities in pronunciation training.

Keywords: self-assessment, English pronunciation teaching and learning, improvement

1. Introduction

Among the abundance of foreign accents of English that can be heard worldwide, the Polish accent of English seems to be recognised fairly easily by a native ear. The ease with which Poles are identified is due to a number of certain specific features of pronunciation that Polish speakers find difficult to eliminate from their accent. Despite relatively regular

contact with English that young people are offered from nursery schools and assumed exposure to the language through the Internet, music, films and computer games, L1 seems to have a dominant influence on L2 production. This influence encompasses various aspects and levels of pronunciation, beginning with individual sound segments that are, first of all, not equal in numbers between the phonological systems of L1 Polish and L2 English, giving no one-to-one correspondence between the vowels and consonants of the two languages, and represent different qualities, physical properties and coarticulation processes. The systems vary in lexical stress placement, reduction and linking processes, which contribute to the perception of linguistic rhythm. Also, the intonation contours differ substantially. This paper concentrates on segmental aspects of English speech as produced by Polish learners of English and attempts to present the way the learners perceive their own progress in pronunciation, compared to the teacher's observations of the students' improvement, and their opinions on the pronunciation training.

1.1. Phonological differences between Polish and English

The phonological differences between the systems of the languages under consideration will be discussed separately for vowels and consonants and are followed by a brief summary of the research in the area of Polish-accented English.

1.1.1. Vowels

Polish and English vowel inventories differ considerably and the most conspicuous difference regards their numerical accounts. There are twelve vowels in English, excluding diphthongs and triphthongs, and six vowels in Polish, excluding the two nasal ones. As a result, for the Polish learners of English, "vowels represent an area of great difficulty and potential confusion" (Śpiewak, Gołębiowska, 2001). What is more, despite their number, none of the English vowels has a closely corresponding sound in Polish. The figures below show the classification diagrams of English and Polish monophthongs in terms of their height, i.e. the degree of raising of the tongue when articulating a given vowel, and backness, i.e. the position of the tongue in relation to the back of the mouth.
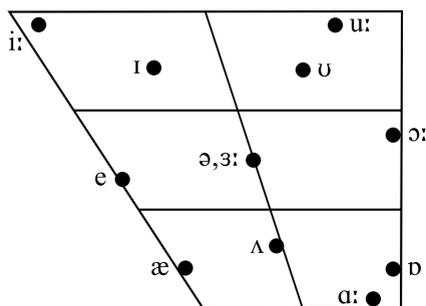

Figure 1. Monophthongs of RP
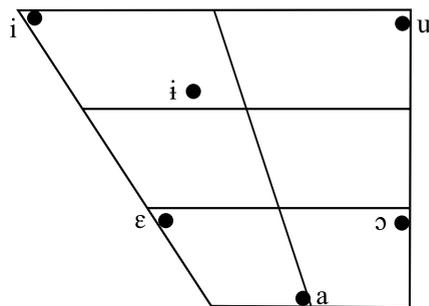(Roach, 2004: 242)

Figure 2. Monophthongs of Polish
(Jassem, 2003: 105)

It can be seen that none of the symbols is repeated in the two languages, although the close front tense and close back tense vowels differ only in terms of the length mark, which is not present in any of the Polish vowels. This is due to the lack of length distinction in Polish. English, on the other hand, makes a regular use of contrastive vowel quantity, hence the problems of Polish learners with maintaining length proportions of vowels closed with fortis and lenis obstruents, i.e. pre-fortis clipping.

There are two vowels in the high front area in both languages, while the high back English vowels have only one counterpart in Polish. Interestingly, the monophthong /ɪ/, despite its close equivalent in Polish /ɨ/, is often pronounced as /i/, which leads to the frequent confusion of pairs of words, e.g. *sheep – ship*, *teen – tin*. The fact that Polish learners of English tend to use /i/ instead seems to be related to Polish spelling conventions, according to which <i> is typically realised as /i/ rather than /ɨ/ (Wierzchowska, 1967). Another reason for substituting /i/ for /ɪ/ could be the fact that, as argued by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2016), English /ɪ/ is in fact more similar to Polish /i/ in terms of its phonological behaviour.

Mid vowels in English outnumber the Polish ones four to two, with no central counterparts on the part of the Polish inventory. The central tense vowel /ɜ:/, despite its relative articulatory ease, is very often replaced with /o/ when "o" appears in spelling, e.g. *work, word*. The back one /ɔ:/ is frequently realised with /ow/, which is the approximation of the English diphthong /əʊ/. This substitution results in the confusion of words: *lawn – loan*, *saw – sew*, *bought – boat* (Śpiewak, Gołębiowska, 2001). There are four open vowels in English: /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɑ:/ and /ɒ/ and only one in Polish: /a/. This disproportion seems to be the source of the greatest difficulty for Polish learners, who encounter a lot of problems in distinguishing between the English vowels in perception, as well as accurate articulation. The vowel /æ/ is usually realised as /ɛ/, making pairs of words *man – men*, *bad – bed* hard to differentiate. This sound can also be confused with /ɑ:/, which in turn may lead to the inconsistency in British vs. American variants of some words, e.g. *grass*, *after* (Śpiewak, Gołębiowska, 2001).

Another major difference between English and Polish vowel systems is the presence of weak, i.e. reduced vowels in English unstressed syllables: schwa /ə/, /i/ and /u/. Vowel reduction is one of the most important features of English encompassing both qualitative and quantitative modifications to a different degree, even up to a complete elision of a sound in faster speech. Polish, on the other hand, has no phonological reduction (Ramus, Dupoux and Mehler, 2003; Jassem, 1962) and its speakers regularly substitute reduced vowels with the full ones, which has a major impact on the perception of speech rhythm.

English diphthongs (and triphthongs) have no equivalents in Polish. Although there are sequences of vowel + glide that are similar to the English closing diphthongs /aɪ/, /eɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/ and /aʊ/, and which Polish learners tend to use in place of the English sounds, with the second element pronounced as /w/ and /j/, they function in a different way in the system, as the split by a syllable boundary is possible in the case of Polish sequences, e.g. *ma-ja* (Sobkowiak, 2004), but not in the case of the English diphthongs or triphthongs that form syllable peaks e.g. *fire*.

1.1.2. Consonants

The differences between Polish and English consonants are numerous, mostly when it comes to the place of articulation of sounds that are similar in both languages and the category of affricates, which is represented by various numbers of phonemes, and dental fricatives which are not to be found in the Polish inventory. However, all these differences do not affect comprehension to a great extent.

There are 24 phonemes in the consonantal inventory of English and 29 phonemes in the Polish inventory. The bigger number of consonants in Polish results from the more complex category of affricates. In English there is only one pair of sounds representing this category, namely the palato-alveolar /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. What is more, Polish distinguishes corresponding fricative sounds /s/ and /z/, /ʂ/ and /ʐ/, /ɕ/ and /ʑ/. As a result, Polish learners often replace the English palato-alveolar affricates and fricatives with the harder non-palatal Polish equivalents. Although the number of fricative phonemes is equal in Polish and English, they are not equivalent. Apart from the previously mentioned sibilants, the sounds /Ɵ/ and /ð/ are not to be found in the Polish system and they often appear to be extremely demanding for Polish learners. Poles use various strategies to cope with these sounds, replacing the voiceless one with /f/, /s/, /t/ or even /ts/, and the voiced one with /v/, /z/, /d/ or /dz/ (Śpiewak and Gołębiowska, 2001). Another English fricative that is frequently substituted in the speech of Polish learners is /h/. Its phonetic realisation in the languages may be treated as a subtle detail, as in English it is glottal, while in Polish, it is velar. Out of plosives, there is one voiceless – voiced pair that is different in the two languages with respect to the place of articulation, namely /t/ and /d/. These sounds are produced with the closure made by the tongue and the alveolar ridge in English, but in Polish the contact is made with the teeth, hence its dental category.

A feature that distinguishes between the realisation of voiceless plosives in English and Polish in certain specific contexts is aspiration. In English, the release phase of voiceless plosives in stressed syllable-initial position is accompanied by a short glottal fricative sound if a vowel follows, e.g. *pen*, *cat*, *potato*, and this is an aspect of pronunciation that Polish speakers of English usually fail to produce.

There is a feature of the Polish accent in English encompassing plosives, fricatives and affricates, that is that Polish speakers tend to devoice word-final lenis obstruents while they speak English. This results from the fact that Polish exhibits phonological devoicing in certain contexts, namely in word-final position and in consonantal clusters with a voiceless sound. The transfer of this Polish rule may cause a confusion between pairs of English words: *pat – pad*, *ice – eyes*, *seat – seed*.

As regards nasals, they are represented by three phonemes in English and four in Polish. The English /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ have very close equivalents in Polish, although there is a difference in the place of articulation of /n/ which is alveolar in English and dental in Polish. Interestingly, /ŋ/, despite its presence in Polish with regard to its articulation, it has different distribution as it is only found when followed by a velar plosive and never closing the final syllable on its own, which is often the case in English. That is why Polish learners of English frequently insert unnecessary velar plosives in words *strong* or *singing*. The English sonorants /l/ and /r/ are also realised with some phonetic differences. The former is alveolar in English

and dental in Polish. Moreover, although in use before the Second World War by some dialects of Eastern Poland (Sobkowiak, 2004), Polish presents no velarised or "dark" realisation of /l/ in the syllable coda, having its clear allophone in all positions, as opposed to English which makes use of both. The pronunciation of the phoneme /r/ by the Polish learners of English is often their give-away feature for two reasons. Firstly, in the context of a non-rhotic variety of English, Polish learners find it hard not to pronounce the consonant post-vocalically. This results from the rhotic nature of Polish, in which the sound is pronounced whenever the grapheme "r" is present in spelling. Secondly, the realisation of the very sound is different. In English it is a frictionless continuant with retroflex post-alveolar place of articulation, while the Polish variant is an alveolar trill or a flap. Interestingly, these Polish allophones are also found in English, but in different contexts. In Polish a trill (or a tap) is the only realisation present in all contexts, and in English a tap may be identified only intervocalically, according to Sobkowiak (2004), but also after /Ɵ/ and /ð/ and sometimes after other consonants, in particular /b/ and /g/. This, however, tends to be a feature of older generation speakers.

Table 1. English consonant phonemes (Śpiewak, Gołębiowska, 2001)

p	b	f	v	Ɵ	ð	t	d
s	z	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	k	g
m	n	ŋ	l	r	j	w	h

Śpiewak and Gołębiowska (2001) present a very general table of English consonants with shaded phonemes having equivalents or near equivalents in Polish and unshaded ones which are assumed to be of considerable difficulty due to their distinctness from the Polish sounds. The sounds might be graded in terms of the frequency with which the Polish learners of English mispronounce them, in terms of their impact on the comprehension or perception of the foreign accent. For the purpose of this study, they serve as the starting point for the analysis of the features which tend to be mispronounced most often by the Polish learners of English.

1.2. Pronunciation self-assessment

Self-assessment is generally related to awareness-raising activities involving students in judging their own performance in L2 with the goal of enhancing learning outcomes (Harris & Brown, 2018). The term is often used interchangeably with self-evaluation, self-reflection or self-monitoring. All of these labels posit "the central role of the student in describing, evaluating and taking actions based on their performance" (McMillan, 2020: 86 after Andrade & Brown, 2016; Brookhart, 2016; Brown & Harris, 2013; Harris & Brown, 2018). Self-evaluation is an activity in which it is the student who is in charge of in assessing her or his performance. However, when asked about the way they perceive their own pronunciation, many learners of English seem to have different perceptions and different opinions on their performance and needs related to the improvement of their speaking skills. According to Derwing (2003), most learners are not aware of the

pronunciation issues that are problematic to them and those who are able to identify their problems usually concentrate on certain individual segments. Dlaska & Krekeler (2008) report that it is difficult for learners to self-assess their own pronunciation skills, even if they are experienced language learners. When they do attempt to evaluate those skills, they are not able to do it in an objective way, e.g. the correlation between the raters' and students' self-assessment appears to be statistically insignificant (Nowacka, 2005). However, it appears that, with regular practice, learners tend to develop their self-evaluation skills and have an impression that self-assessment activities help improve their pronunciation (Brannen et al., 2021). Moreover, in a study investigating the relationship between learners' self-assessment and experts' assessment in French pronunciation course, Lappin-Fortin & Rye (2014) found that the students were relatively accurate in their self-evaluation of the post-test performance, especially with regard to the issues that had been taught explicitly in-class, although they had the tendency to overestimate their performance in terms of native-like abilities.

The lack of awareness about their pronunciation difficulties can be attributed to the fact that the learners do not receive regular feedback or instruction from their teachers starting from primary school and continuing in secondary school or higher education institutions. Proper and frequent pronunciation instruction and feedback in an English classroom seem to be rare. This situation is mainly the result of the teachers' conviction that they do not have enough time to teach pronunciation as they are overloaded with grammar, vocabulary and other skills that needs to be improved. However, English teachers are often aware of the importance of pronunciation instruction, but they are not confident enough and lack the knowledge and skills to provide it. Those who are eager to implement pronunciation in their teaching often do not seem to understand which elements to prioritize and how to teach them (Munro & Derwing, 2011). This seems to be the consequence of the absence or low quality training as English teachers admit that they received little or no professional training dealing with how to teach pronunciation during their teacher training courses. The results of the survey conducted by Henderson (2012) among teachers of English reveal that only 18.75% of Polish respondents claimed that they had received some formal training with respect to teaching pronunciation. Some teachers may also feel uncomfortable with their own pronunciation (e.g. Polish teachers tend to be relatively critical in the self-evaluation of their own accent (Henderson et al., 2012)) and hold the assumption that their imperfect pronunciation is the factor that prevents them from being a good model for their learners. This may result in neglecting the pronunciation component in their teaching. The above-mentioned lack of awareness, confidence and a lack of support for teachers from higher institutions responsible for designing English programs may suggest that learners of English, in general, are not being taught well with regard to pronunciation (Munro & Derwing, 2011).

While not being aware of their pronunciation problems, many English learners recognize the need to improve their pronunciation skills in order to meet academic or professional requirements (Johnson & Parrish, 2010). They seem to be aware of the fact that their pronunciation has an impact on the quality of their lives in terms of their general communication skills, relationships with native speakers and career development (Zoss,

2015). Thus, they seem to be motivated and express a positive attitude towards pronunciation training they might get in the process of English language learning. However, "the pronunciation of adult L2 learners is particularly resistant to change, even if those learners have received targeted pronunciation instruction" (Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2010: 171). Obviously, a number of students achieve some progress and many benefit from pronunciation instruction in various ways. The most noticeable improvement may be observed with the use of pre-test and post-test recording of a reading task, although this may hardly represent the spontaneous speech in natural conditions. Listening to one's own audio recordings may be a useful tool in self-monitoring and self-assessment of the students' progress as they may become actively involved in improving and evaluating their pronunciation.

2. Experiment

This paper concentrates on self-assessment and self-perception of English pronunciation as represented by a group of Polish students of English. Its general aim is to get some insight into the way Polish learners of English assess their own progress in improving English pronunciation. The paper reports on a small-scale experiment with a pre- and post-test design set within the area of Polish-accented speech that often concentrates on some individual aspects of Poles' performance in English. The more specific goal of the study is to explore learners' reflections on their pronunciation, course outline and main problem areas. Finally, the study also attempts to compare the subjective self-assessment of Polish learners of English with the (more) objective assessment of a teacher.

2.1. Participants

Seventeen first-year Polish students of English philology (University of Łódź) took part in the project. Their mean age was 19 at the time of the recording and the majority of them were female (11). Their experience with learning English varied between 4 and 16 years, with the mean of 11 years. The students declared they had undergone no regular phonetic training prior to the recording. The degree of exposure to natural English speech between the informants is supposed to vary to a considerable extent, with only a few students informing about their short-term visits to English-speaking countries. All of the participants attended a two-semester pronunciation course focusing on English sound segments with elements of connected speech processes. The model accent was Standard British English (SBE).

2.2. Material

The material used in the experiment is the diagnostic passage 'Shopping List 1' included in the well-known English pronunciation course book *Ship or Sheep* by Ann Baker (2006). It consists of a list of phrases, organised into 24 lines of different length and focusing on various sound segments, both vocalic and consonantal. The phrases include everyday use items of vocabulary, covering the topics of food, clothing and family to ensure that all

the informants know and use the words in L2 and none of the items comes as a surprise during the recording.

Apart from the reading passage, the material also included two questionnaires. The first questionnaire (Appendix 1) contained questions related to the participants' sex, age, language learning experience, phonetic training experience and visits to English-speaking countries. The second questionnaire (Appendix 2) was divided into two parts. The first part was a list of sound segments and two other pronunciation issues (final voicing and consonantal clusters) that are potentially difficult for Poles to produce with words selected from *The Shopping List* and representing the sounds in question. Next to both sounds and words, there were boxes that could be ticked by the participants during the procedure of the task. The second part of the questionnaire included two sets of questions related to the impressions of two recording sessions:

1. Which mispronunciations in the **first recording** are:
   – most annoying to you?
   – most embarrassing to you?
   – sound very Polish?
   – sound acceptable?
2. Which sounds, words and phrases in the **second recording**
   – are you proud of?
   – sound native to you?
   – still need improvement?

The two questions were followed by five open-ended questions asking about what the participants think about their pronunciation, improvement and the most efficient ways of pronunciation practise and their opinions and needs as for the continuation of pronunciation training in the following year of their studies. The students also had a possibility to add some more comments.

2.3. Procedure

The study had a pre- and post-test design. The first recording session took place at the very beginning of the academic year (prior to any formal pronunciation training that first-year students obtain at the university) and the second session was conducted at the end of the academic year. The informants were recorded directly into a laptop computer using MXL Studio 1 USB microphone via Audacity recorder. The participants were asked to enter the room individually and read the text from a piece of paper without preparation. They also filled in two questionnaires. The first one was handed in to the students on the day of the first recording session and contained questions concerning their biographical data. The second questionnaire was distributed after the second recording and the informants were asked to fill it in at home. It consisted of two parts. The first part was an evaluation sheet and the second one was a set of questions related to the students' performance in the recordings and their pronunciation in general. In order to complete the evaluation sheet, the participants were required to listen carefully to the first recording (as many times as they needed), identify errors or inadequate realisations of sounds, then listen to the second recording and compare the pronunciation of sounds and words that are listed

in the questionnaire with the first recording, ticking the boxes with sounds/words whose pronunciation they perceived as improved. The auditory analysis of the recorded data and the verification of the progress was conducted by the teacher at the same time. Finally, the assessment of pronunciation improvement conducted by the students was compared with the teacher's assessment. Although the recordings provide numerous aspects of Polish students' production in English that are worth investigation, it was agreed that only those features that had been discussed and practised in-class would be taken into account in the assessment.

2.4. Variables

The features selected for the self-assessment are sounds that were included in the syllabus of the first-year English studies pronunciation class the participants had attended.

- /iː/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /i/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); here, its realisation is analysed in words: *cheese, cheap, tea, Chinese, peas, bean, please*;
- /ɪ/ is absent from the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /i/, which may result in confusion of pairs of words, e.g. *sheep – ship* or *beat – bit* (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001); its analysis covers the following words: *fifty, biscuits, fish, tin, milk, sister, English, little, mister, Smith, his*;
- /ɔː/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds as it is found half-way between Polish /o/ and /a/ (Sobkowiak, 2004) and tends to be replaced by Polish /o/; its realisation is analysed in words: *four, forks, small, ball*;
- /æ/ is absent from the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /a/ or /ɛ/ (Weckwerth, 2011); it is analysed in words: *jam, apple, cabbage*;
- /ɑː/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /a/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *large*;
- /ə/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by full vowels (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001), especially Polish /e/ (Sobkowiak, 2004), although the choice of substitutes highly depends on spelling; its realisation is analysed in words: *lemon, of, for*;
- /ɜː/ is absent from the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /ɛ/ or /o/ (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001), but again the selection of the Polish substitutes depends on the spelling; here it is analysed in words: *girl, shirt, skirt*;
- /ʌ/ is absent from the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /a/, /u/ or /o/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); it is analysed in words: *mother, cups, nuts, honey, bun, onion, supper*;
- /ɒ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /o/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in a word: *coffee*;
- /uː/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /u/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *spoons, blue, shoes, fruit*;
- /ʊ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /u/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *good, sugar*;

- /əʊ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by a monophthong /o/ or a sound sequence /ow/ (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001); its realisation is analysed in words: *cold, yellow*;
- /eə/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by a monophthong /e/ or a long schwa (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *Mary, hair, pear*;
- dark [ɫ] is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /l/; its realisation is analysed in words: *apples, ball, little*;
- aspirated [pʰ] is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by unaspirated Polish /p/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *paper, pair, pears*;
- aspirated [tʰ] is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by unaspirated Polish dental /t/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *tea, ten, two, tin, television*;
- aspirated [kʰ] is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish unaspirated /k/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *cabbage, coffee, cake, kilos*;
- /Ɵ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /f/ /s/ /t/ or even /ts/ (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001); its realisation is analysed in words: *something, Smith, birthday, Thursday*;
- /ð/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /d/, /v/, /z/ or even /dz/ (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001); its realisation is analysed in words*: mother, father, the*;
- /ŋ/ – although this sound is present in Polish in restricted contexts, it is often realised as /n/ and with following /k/ or /g/ (Śpiewak & Gołębiowska, 2001); its realisation is examined in words: *string, long*;
- /ʃ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /ş/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *shoes, shampoo, shop, English*;
- /ʒ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /z̨/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in a word: *television*;
- /tʃ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /tş/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *cheese, cheap, Chinese*;
- /dʒ/ is not present in the system of Polish sounds and tends to be replaced by Polish /dz̨/ (Sobkowiak, 2004); its realisation is analysed in words: *jam, oranges, cabbage*;
- word-final lenis obstruents tend to be fully devoiced by Polish speakers (Sobkowiak, 2004), often with inadequate (shortened) length of the preceding vowel; the feature is analysed in words: *cheese*, *eggs, peas, big, five, cold, good, bread, Bob, please*;
- quality of /r/ and rhoticity – Polish is rhotic with the trilled or tapped variant of /r/ sound and hence the tendency to transfer this feature into L2 English; this feature is studied in words: *sister, father, four, forks, mother, mother's, birthday, shirt, skirt, pair, pear, Thursday, girl's*.

The number of sample words representing a given feature differs as the diagnostic passage does not list the same number of words for a particular sound.

2.5. Results

In the present study, improvement is understood as a shift towards an adequate English sound category. Error is understood here as an inadequate realisation of an English sound. R-colouring / rhoticity in words *four, forks, large, girl, shirt, skirt, hair, pair* were additionally treated as errors of inadequate vowel quality, as students were encouraged to be consistent in their non-rhotic pronunciation. Sp3 is an exception here, as she presented a consistent, near-native American pronunciation, which both the student and the teacher decided not to alter. The total number of the analysed lexical items was 96. The number of errors presented in Table 2 refers to the first recording. The mean of the errors identified by the teacher for the whole group was 49 (51%) and there were considerable interspeaker differences: 3 errors in the case of Sp3 and 92 errors in the case of Sp7. The number of improvements identified by the teacher and the students is approximate in some cases (e.g. Sp 3and Sp 7 with only one difference and Sp 8 with two differences) and varies considerably in some other cases (e.g. Sp 12 noted 84 improvements while the teacher observed 46 improvements). Some students appear to be over-optimistic about their progress (e.g. Sp5, Sp12, Sp13 and Sp14), while others underestimate it (e.g. Sp2, Sp6 and Sp17). The mean of the differences between speaker and teacher improvement identification is 14, with individual differences between 1 and 48.

Table 2. The number of errors and Teacher (T) and Student (S) improvements for individual speakers

	Sp1	Sp2	Sp3	Sp4	Sp5	Sp6	Sp7	Sp8	Sp9
nr of errors	34 (35%)	76 (79%)	3 (0.3%)	58 (58%)	31 (29%)	24 (24%)	92 (96%)	62 (65%)	59 (61%)
T – nr of improv.	12	40	2	28	29	16	69	45	36
S – nr of improv.	18	21	3	21	48	31	68	47	51
T – S difference	6	19	1	7	19	15	1	2	15
	Sp10	Sp11	Sp12	Sp13	Sp14	Sp15	Sp16	Sp17	
nr of errors	31 (32%)	35 (36%)	47 (48%)	59 (61%)	46 (48%)	54 (56%)	63 (66%)	56 (58%)	M: 49 (51%) SD: 21
T – nr of improv.	28	27	46	33	38	38	31	44	M: 33 SD: 15
S – nr of improv.	31	20	84	64	56	41	44	16	M: 39 SD: 22
T – S difference	3	7	48	31	18	3	13	28	M: 14 SD: 13

Table 3 presents the number of errors and teacher and student improvements for each of the sound under scrutiny (together with final voicing) for the whole group and is organised according to the percentage of improvements perceived by the teacher. Here, as well, both similarities and differences may be observed with regard to the identified improvements. According to the teacher, the greatest progress had been made in the case of the diphthongs /əʊ/ and /eə/ and the vowels /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/. The progress was least observable in the case of aspirated plosives and palato-alveolar affricates. The students, on the other hand, assessed the vowels /ʌ/, /ɪ/ and /ɔ:/, and the fricative /ʒ/ as the ones that had undergone the greatest improvement. The aspirated /t/, the vowels /ʊ/, /u:/ and /ɒ/ were judged as those that improved the least. The disadvantage here is the unbalanced word representation for the analysed sounds with the number of tokens per sound differing from 1 to 11.

Table 3. The number of errors and teacher (T) and student (S) improvements for individual sounds

sound	nr of to-kens	T – nr of errors	T – nr im-prov..	S – nr of improv.	sound	nr of to-kens	T – nr of errors	T – nr of improv.	S – nr of improv.
/əʊ/	2	30	28 (93%)	20 (67%)	[ɫ]	3	15	10 (67%)	13 (87%)
/ɑ:/	1	12	11 (92%)	10 (91%)	/ϴ/	4	48	30 (63%)	36 (75%)
/ɜ:/	3	36	33 (92%)	28 (78%)	/ʃ/	4	24	15 (63%)	20 (83%)
/eə/	3	33	30 (91%)	28 (85%)	/ʒ/	1	4	2 (63%)	4 (100%)
/ə/	3	29	26 (90%)	26 (90%)	/ʊ/	2	21	13 (62%)	13 (62%)
/ŋ/	2	34	29 (85%)	27 (79%)	/u:/	4	44	24 (55%)	24 (55%)
/ɔ:/	4	40	33 (83%)	38 (95%)	final voicing	10	84	43 (51%)	60 (71%)
/ɪ/	11	60	48 (80%)	58 (97%)	[kʰ]	4	51	24 (47%)	28 (55%)
/æ/	3	29	23 (79%)	24 (83%)	/tʃ/	3	16	7 (44%)	13 (81%)
/ɒ/	1	9	7 (78%)	5 (56%)	[pʰ]	3	32	12 (38%)	28 (88%)
/ð/	3	40	31 (78%)	31 (78%)	/dʒ/	3	16	6 (38%)	12 (75%)
/i:/	7	53	40 (75%)	46 (87%)	[tʰ]	5	41	9 (22%)	16 (39%)
/ʌ/	7	46	31 (67%)	46 (100%)					

In the first recording, the pronunciation of the majority of participants included features of both British and American accents, which was predominantly represented by a high degree of rhoticity and some vowel realisations in selected lexical items. 11 students were fully rhotic in their performance, 3 students were mostly or half-rhotic, 2 students were mostly non-rhotic and 1 student was non-rhotic (with one exception: one instance of post-vocalic /r/). In the second recording, the participants' pronunciation was much more consistent in the direction of a standard non-rhotic British accent: only Sp3, a declared American accent learner, was fully rhotic, one student was half rhotic, another was mostly non-rhotic and the remaining 14 were non-rhotic. Apart from the post-vocalic

/r/, there are two words that differ in terms of vowel realisations between the British and American standard accents, namely *tomatoes* and *coffee*. In the first recording the majority of participants (N=10) pronounced the word *tomatoes* the American way and only two students provided the American version of the word *coffee*. In the second recording, all the students were consistent with the British pronunciation (except Sp3).

Table 4. Rhoticity in the two recordings

	rec.1 (nr of speakers)	rec.2 (nr of speakers)
rhotic	11	1(Sp3)
mostly rhotic	1	0
half-rhotic	2	1
mostly non-rhotic	2	1
non-rhotic	1(1exception)	14

The answers to the first question included in the questionnaire and related directly to the recording provide information about the learners' perception of their own mis-pronunciations in the first recording. According to the participants, the most irritating mispronunciations referred to the following words: *brown* (3), *string* (2), *something* (2), *girl* (2), *small* (2), *cheese* (2), *nuts* (2), *skirt* (2), *strong* (2), *tomatoes* (2), *onions* (2), *biscuit* (2). The numbers in brackets indicate the numbers of participants that assessed a given mispronunciation as irritating. The mispronunciations in the words above refer to inadequate realisation of the diphthong in *brown* (the diphthong was not listed in the Self-assessment sheet, but three students observed its inappropriate quality), Polish /r/ and inadequate velar nasal in *string* and *strong*, replacing the dental fricative /Ɵ/ with /f/ in *something*, rhotic pronunciation in *girl* and *skirt*, replacing English vowels with the Polish ones in *girl*, *cheese* and *onions*, pronouncing *biscuit* with a labial-velar glide /bɪskwɪt/ and spelling pronunciation in *nuts, skirt* and *small*. Some participants did not note individual words containing irritating mispronunciations, but provided some comments, e.g.

Sp2 : *all words containing* /ŋ/ *and 'th'*

Sp12: *post-vocalic* /r/

Sp17: *pronouncing* /r/ *almost everywhere.*

The most embarrassing mispronunciations that were enumerated by the participants are found in the words: *cabbage* (4), *trousers* (4), *tomatoes* (4), *bear* (3), *dear* (3), *nuts* (2), *mother* (2), *brown* (2). The words again contain inadequate vowel and consonant qualities. Speaker 3 wrote that the way she pronounces the sound /tʃ/ is embarrassing for her and Speaker 12 find the vowels embarrassing, as "in general they sound very Polish" in the first recording.

When asked to mark the mispronunciations that sound typically Polish to their ears, the participants ticked the words: *string* (6), *sugar* (4), *long* (4), *strong* (4), *father* (3), *mother* (3). The cluster /str-/, the fricative /ʃ/, the velar nasal /ŋ/ and the dental fricative /ð/ is thus judged as pronounced the Polish way. Additionally, Speaker 17 reported the following: *I guess it's pronouncing* /r/ *in every context.*

The mispronunciations that were assessed as acceptable by the students refer to the vowel /ə/, aspirated [kʰ] and velarised [ł] consonants in words: *lemon* (3), *cake* (3), *milk* (3). Speaker 17 commented in the following way: *I feel like my /ə/ was kind of acceptable, generally vowels were not so bad*.

The second question in the questionnaire is related to the second recording. This time, the participants were first asked which sounds require more practice. The responses were different for different speakers and some of the speakers did not provide an answer at all. Those who did mentioned both vowels and consonants that they feel need more consideration:

(Sp1): *th sounds*
(Sp2): /ʃ/ /ʒ/ /tʃ/ /dʒ/ *in some cases*
(Sp5): /æ/
(Sp6): /u:/, /ɑ:/
(Sp7): *aspirated plosives,* /r/, /ŋ/, [ł], /ɪ/, /dʒ/, /tʃ/, /Ɵ/, /ð/
(Sp12): /i:/
(Sp17): *I think that every sound still needs improvement, but I need to focus more on* /Ɵ/ *although I feel I made a huge progress on it*.

In the next part of the question the participants were asked to indicate which sounds sound native (English) to their ears. The majority of students gave no answer to this question as, presumably, they did not feel entitled to compare their pronunciation to a native speaker's one. However, some of them did provide some sounds that they had assessed as native-like:

(Sp2): '*lemon' – I can do /ə/ sometimes*
(Sp16): *all vowels and /ð/ for sure*
(Sp4): /əʊ/, /ŋ/, [kʰ]
(Sp6): /ʃ/
(Sp13): /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/

The final part of the question referred to the sounds that the students were proud of in the second recording. Again, more than a half of the students did not answer the question. Those who did mentioned the following sounds:

(Sp2): /ə/ *is sometimes good,* /ɪə/, /ŋ/ *– I learnt this sound,* /æ/ *– I learnt this sound, too*
(Sp4): /əʊ/, /ŋ/, [kʰ]
(Sp6): /ŋ/, /ð/
(Sp12): *lack of post-vocalic* /r/
(Sp13): /ɜ:/, [pʰ], /ɑ:/
(Sp17): /ð/ *and* /Ɵ/ *– I feel I made a huge progress in these sounds*.

The next question in the questionnaire asked about what the students like about their pronunciation. It was an open-ended question with no suggestions or options for the students to choose from. Interestingly, despite the fact that the pronunciation training that the students attended focused on segments, four participants wrote that fluency is the aspect of their pronunciation that they like most. Another four students reported that it is the improvement that they like. Three participants liked their non-rhotic pronunciation, two were fond of their production of palato-alveolar sounds. The remaining responses

are: *American accent, It's more British, sounding more native, aspiration and stress*. There were also two extreme answers provided by the participants: *I like my accent* and *Nothing. It's very bad*.
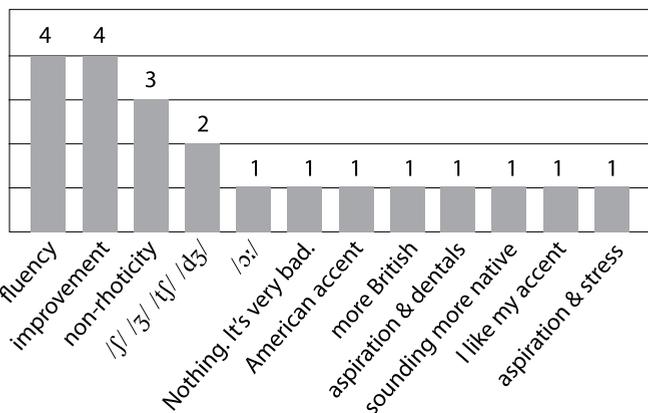

Figure 3. Question 3: What do you like about your pronunciation?

The students were asked the opposite question as well, namely what they don't like about their pronunciation. The most common answer was *mispronunciations*. Two participants do not like their Polish /r/ or rhoticity in general. Another two claim that sounding too Polish is the feature of their pronunciation that they dislike the most. The vowel /æ/ is an answer provided by another two students. The single responses given by the speakers refer either to individual sounds or phenomena related to connected speech, or to an inconsistent accent.
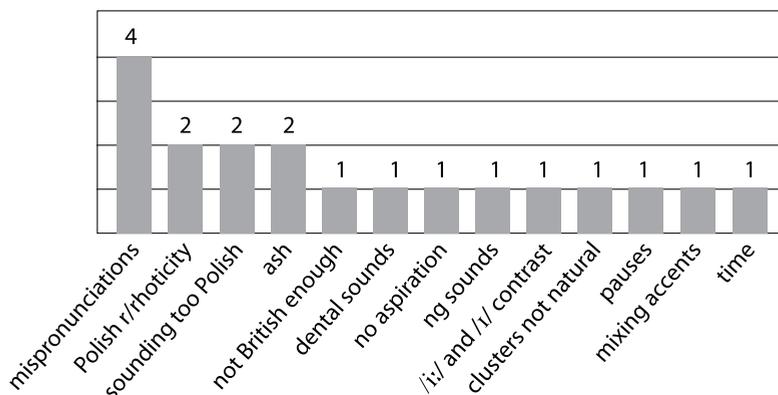
Figure 4. Question 4: What don't you like about your pronunciation?

In the next question, the students were asked whether they felt their pronunciation had improved and, if yes, in what way. All of the participants admitted that they felt that their pronunciation had improved over the two-semester course. The answer that appeared most frequently was *the awareness of English sounds* (11 students). Four answers were

related to the correct pronunciation of individual words, other mention accent consistency, fluency and self-confidence.
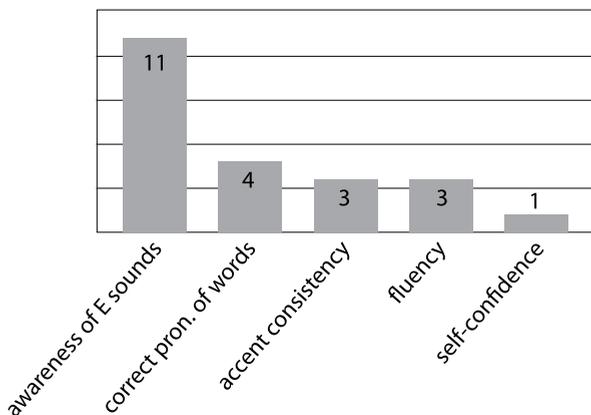
Figure 5. Question 5: Do you feel that your pronunciation has improved? In what way?

When asked about possible means of improving pronunciation that the students find most efficient in improving pronunciation, over a half of them pointed to 'listen and repeat' tasks. Other participants mentioned IPA transcription, watching British films/TV, speaking frequently and activities included in the interactive pronunciation course *Say it right* that the students used in their training.
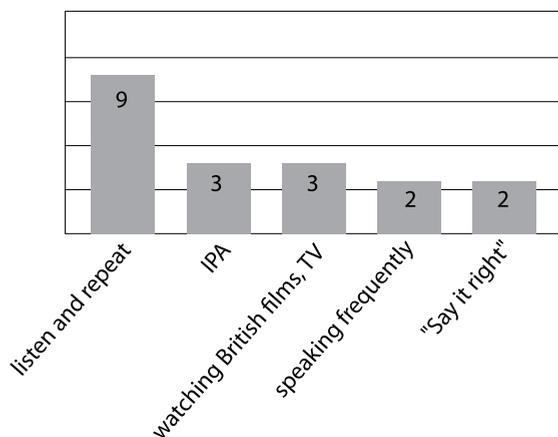
Figure 6. Question 6: What works best in improving English pronunciation? What activities work best for you?

The participants were also invited to share their opinions on the necessity or need for the continuation of pronunciation training during the second year of their studies. All of them stated that the pronunciation course should be continued and some of them gave the following reasons:

– *Yes, because **it is hard to get rid of bad pronunciation habits** that you've had since the beginning of learning English (in my case 10 years).* (Sp17)
– *Yes, I think that my pronunciation could be much better.* (Sp8)
– *Yes, I need more pronunciation practice because practice makes perfect.* (Sp11)
– *Yes, I think pronunciation practice is really important so it shouldn't be abandoned.* (Sp16)

Furthermore, the students suggested possible elements of pronunciation that could be the focus of the extended training in the following year. The majority of these suggestions are linked to word-based pronunciation practice (words commonly mispronounced, false friends, etc.), connected speech, fluency and fast speech processes. Still, some of the participants would like to continue practising individual sounds (dental fricatives, velar nasal and final voicing), as they do not feel comfortable with their production yet. There are students that would like to focus on listening to varieties of English other than RP and analysing the differences between them.

The students were also encouraged to write some additional comments with respect to the pronunciation training they had attended. Some of them seem to be quite optimistic and expressing the raised awareness of the differences between the phonological systems of English and Polish, and the readiness to use the tools to progress more in self-monitored individual learning (*I know what to do to make it [pronunciation]better*).

– *Apart from helping me improve pronunciation, these classes have developed my listening skills. **I can understand native speakers of English better** when I am aware of the processes like elisions and assimilations. These were one of the most interesting classes (both practical phonetics and descriptive grammar).*
– *I think the classes were very useful, because I have improved my pronunciation and **I know what to do to make it better**.*
– *I like so much the form of our phonetics classes and I think it helped many of us improve our pronunciation. I hope it won't change next year.*
– *Generally glad and embarrassed after listening to those recordings. Good because of improvement I made, and **embarrassed because of mistakes made in the first recording**.*

Table 5. If yes, what should they be focused on?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Learning pronunciation of different words	They should focus on all aspects of pronunciation. We should also learn about dialectal differences and listen to different accents.	The pronunciation of whole words, not only single sounds, and the pronunciation of sounds in the context of whole sentences – fluency	On the pronunciation of individual sounds and tricky words	Developing fluency and fast speech processes	On accents other than RP, word stress, difficult sounds /Θ/, /ð/, /ŋ/ and final devoicing, tricky words, false friends.	I don't know, but I would like to do things related to improving pronunciation, because I still feel ashamed of the way I speak. And after first year of studies I feel ashamed even more, which is not to be related with the way the classes were taught.	On practising individual sounds and reading whole sentences fluently. There should be a lot of listening activities.	I think I need to practise everything.

10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
I would like to practise words which are problema-tic for Polish speakers. For example, which are usually misleading.	I would like to listen more to records with correct pronunication and also some more 'false friends'.	Connected speech	Sounds /Θ/, /ð/	I would like to practise more pro-blematic and hard words.	I would like to practise the sounds /Θ/, /ð/ and /ŋ/, and the difference between /iː/ and /ɪ/.	–	One thing which I would like to practise is fast speech. Not in the way of writing the processes on the paper, but in a way of speaking fast.	

2.6. Discussion

Polish learners of English at the beginning of the pronunciation course offered to first-year university students represent various levels of pronunciation skills. They are expected to eliminate the features of Polish accent in their English and master L2 vowel contrasts and consonant articulation. In a self-assessment task based on the comparison of two recordings (before and after the course), the participants, as a group, identified a similar number of improved items as the teacher did. Individually, the students tend to observe more instances of improved items than the teacher: twelve students out of seventeen noted more improvements than the teacher, which seemingly results from being more critical towards their performance in the first recording (e.g. Sp4 and Sp12) than the teacher or overoptimistic as for their progress in the second recording. Also, there is a considerable variability between the number of teacher- and student-identified improvements on the individual level (the difference between the number of identified improvements ranged from 1 for Sp3 and Sp7 to 48 for Sp12). What is more, the students with a high number of self-observed improvements expressed greater embarrassment about Rec.1 performance and their initial ignorance about the English sound system. However, the participants seemed to show a positive attitude towards the task, which may have contributed to raising their awareness of their own progress in pronunciation skills and the phonological system of English in general.

There seems to be a considerable inter- and intra-speaker variability in the first recording, for example inconsistent rhoticity (mixing rhotic and non-rhotic pronunciation) and inconsistent final voicing i.e. producing voiceless consonants irrespective of the following voiced or voiceless context: *good sugar, good bread, good veal* (e.g. Sp1). Some students tend to exaggerate the production of certain sounds or are over-concentrated on them, e.g. aspiration (Sp15 *ten eggs*), final-voicing (Sp15 *good bread*), *th* sounds. This makes the impression of unnatural speech in some cases, yet it seems fairly understandable at this stage and when the training is focused mainly on segments.

In this study the improved items are generally words-based, not sound-based. The participants read the same text twice, trying to produce the target sounds in the same words and contexts. Thus, they learn to articulate a given sound in a particular word, but they may not be consistent with the sound in other lexical items or in spontaneous speech. One of the major drawbacks of this pilot study is an unbalanced word representation for the analysed sounds. More judges, instead of one, engaged in assessing the learners' progress would ensure more reliable results of a more objective evaluation of the learners' pronunciation.

3. Conclusions

The ability to assess one's own pronunciation may be a difficult task. In this study the participants were asked to evaluate their performance after a two-semester course during which they were offered explicit instructions and regular feedback on the segments and certain connected speech features they attempted to master. What is more, the students also attended descriptive grammar classes concentrated on the classification and description of

English sounds together with connected speech processes. This theoretical and practical input with presumably sufficient exposure to vowel and consonant contrasts should result in adequate knowledge and practical abilities with regard to the production and general awareness of English sounds. However, the study shows that the learners tend to assess themselves in an inconsistent way and their self-evaluations do not always correspond with the teacher's assessment. Moreover, the participants' judgments may be affected by various factors, including self-confidence and anxiety. The results of this pilot study seem to confirm the conviction held by Nowacka (2005) who observed that students with higher pronunciation skills appear to underestimate them, while the ones who are weaker in their performance have the tendency to overestimate them. What is more, in a study verifying the relationship between language anxiety and self-perceived English pronunciation competence, Szyszka (2011) found that more apprehensive participants perceived their pronunciation as poor, while those with lower levels of anxiety declared higher pronunciation skills. It is thus crucial on the part of the teachers to attempt to reduce anxiety in the classroom that may prevent the more self-conscious learners from achieving optimal success, while offering the opportunities for self-assessment and self-reflections over the learners' progress. Finally, self-assessment may be viewed as a valuable pedagogical tool for helping second language learners to raise their awareness of certain specific pronunciation difficulties and improve their pronunciation skills.

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Appendix 1

Pronunciation self-assessment

1. Which sounds do you think have been improved due to pronunciation practice?   Please, tick the words that contain an improved sound.

/iː/	cheese ☐	cheap ☐	tea ☐	Chinese ☐	peas ☐	bean ☐	please ☐
/ɪ/	fifty ☐	biscuits ☐	fish ☐	milk ☐	tin ☐	sister ☐	English ☐
	little ☐	mister ☐	Smith ☐	his ☐			
/ɔː/	four ☐	forks ☐	small ☐	ball ☐			
/æ/	jam ☐	apple ☐	cabbage ☐				
/ɑː/	large ☐						
/e/	lemon ☐	of ☐	for ☐				
/ʌ/	mother ☐	cups ☐	nuts ☐	honey ☐	bun ☐	onion ☐	supper ☐
/ɜː/	girl ☐	shirt ☐	skirt ☐				
/ɒ/	coffee ☐						
/uː/	spoons ☐	blue ☐	shoes ☐	fruit ☐			
/ʊ/	good ☐	sugar ☐					
/əʊ/	cold ☐	yellow ☐					
/eə/	Mary ☐	hair ☐	pear ☐				
[ɪ]	apples ☐	ball ☐	little ☐				
/pʰ/	paper ☐	pair ☐	pears ☐				
/tʰ/	tea ☐	ten ☐	two ☐	tin ☐	television ☐		
/kʰ/	cabbage ☐	coffee ☐	cake ☐	kilos ☐			
/θ/	something ☐	Smith ☐	birthday ☐	Thursday ☐			
/ð/	the ☐	mother ☐	father ☐				
/ŋ/	long ☐	string ☐					
/ʃ/	shoes ☐	shampoo ☐	shop ☐	English ☐			
/ʒ/	television ☐						
/tʃ/	cheese ☐	cheap ☐	Chinese ☐				
/dʒ/	jam ☐	oranges ☐	cabbage ☐				
final voicing	cheese ☐	eggs ☐	big ☐	five ☐	cold ☐		
	bread ☐	Bob ☐	peas ☐	please ☐	good ☐		
rhoticity	sister ☐	father ☐	four ☐	forks ☐	mother ☐	mother's ☐	
	birthday ☐	shirt ☐	skirt ☐	pair ☐	pear ☐	Thursday ☐	girl's ☐

Appendix 2

Pronunciation self-assessment part 2

1. Which mispronunciations in the **first recording** are:
- most annoying to you
- most embarrassing to you
- sound very Polish
- sound acceptable

2. Which sounds, words and phrases in the **second recording**
- are you proud of
- sound native to you
- still need improvement

3. What do you like about your pronunciation?

4. What don't you like about your pronunciation?

5. Do you feel your pronunciation has improved? In what way?

6. What works best in improving pronunciation? What activities work best for you?

7. Do you feel you need some more pronunciation practice during the second year of your studies?
7a. If yes, what would you like to practice most?

8. Other comments:

Streszczenie
Samoocena oraz autorefleksja polskich studentów na temat ich własnych postępów w procesie przyswajania wymowy angielskiej

Celem niniejszego badania pilotażowego jest opis, analiza i interpretacja wyników samooceny wymowy języka angielskiego przeprowadzonej wśród polskich studentów filologii angielskiej oraz przedstawienie ich refleksji na temat postępu i potrzeb związanych z przyswajaniem wymowy angielskiej. Artykuł zwraca również uwagę na indywidualne czynniki wpływające na postrzeganie własnej wymowy, takie jak pewność siebie czy lękliwość. Siedemnastu studentów anglistyki wzięło udział w badaniu oceniającym własny postęp w artykulacji poszczególnych dźwięków angielskich, bazując na dwóch nagraniach przeprowadzonych przed i po kursie wymowy, trwającym dwa semestry. Wyniki samooceny zostały zestawione i porównane z oceną nauczyciela. Wszyscy uczestnicy czytali tekst diagnostyczny, uwzględniający poszczególne segmenty standardowej wymowy języka angielskiego (Standard British English – SBE). Następnie wypełnili kwestionariusz zawierający pytania otwarte związane z nastawieniem studentów i odczuciami względem swoich błędów w wymowie, postrzegania swojego sposobu mówienia oraz z opiniami na temat najbardziej efektywnych metod i technik wspomagających trening wymowy i chęci jego kontynuacji.

Słowa kluczowe: samoocena, nauczanie i uczenie się wymowy angielskiej, postęp