

REPORT

L1 TRANSFER IN A PC WORLD: WHY NOT LINGUA FRANCA CORE AGAIN?*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to challenge certain assumptions underlying Jennifer Jenkins's *Lingua Franca Core* – a 'democratic' model for the pronunciation of English as an International Language – particularly with regard to Jenkins's (2000) claims concerning the role of native language phonic transfer in the process of learning/using English as a lingua franca of the modern world. The author intends to cast some doubt on the viability of the hypothesised one-to-one correspondence between the (un)teachability of certain target language phonetic items, and their (ir)relevance, i.e. relative contribution to speaker's intelligibility. The argument outlined in the paper is based on some empirical data, i.e. a quasi-longitudinal study of phonetic performance of Polish students of English on two selected L2 phonic variables with radically different degrees of 'relevance'. The pattern of acquisition displayed in the data substantially diverges from the one outlined above, and thus provides some empirical verification of the hypotheses proposed in Jenkins's influential publication.

1. Introduction

The *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC) is a relatively recent proposal for the simplification of English phonology, put forward by Jennifer Jenkins, and thoroughly discussed in Jenkins 2000. The LFC can be described as a model for the pronunciation of English used for communication among non-native speakers, i.e. precisely as a lingua franca of the contemporary world. Obviously, the idea of simplifying the phonic structure of English when used for such purposes is by no means new or unique. Some earlier proposals of this kind, such as Gimson's (1978) RIP (Rudimentary International Pronunciation) or Crystal's (1997) WSSE (World Standard Spoken English) are discussed in Seidlhofer (2002) or Sobkowiak (2003). LFC, however, seems to be a hot issue in the current EFL literature, stirring up strong although mixed emotions (which was evident during the workshop "Focus on Accents" organised at the 34th Poznań Linguistic

* This is an allusion to the title of Sobkowiak (2003) and Sobkowiak (forthcoming).

Meeting in May 2003), and gaining more and more advocates, both in the community of linguists (e.g. Seidlhofer 2001) and among public figures.

Part of the LFC's success is undoubtedly due to the fact that it also constitutes an attempt to democratise the English phonology, in terms of minimising the advantageous position of native vs. non-native speakers of the language. Any potential claim to superiority on the part of the former group is explicitly renounced in Jenkins's recent article (2004), whose message is evident in the title: "Beware the natives and their norms". This concern with political correctness, to which the title of the present paper alludes, is also evident in the terminology used in Jenkins (2000), where even the very terms 'native' and 'non-native' are claimed to imply superiority of the former, and are thus predominantly replaced by 'MES' (monolingual English speaker) and 'NBES' (non-bilingual English speaker), respectively. The obsolescence of treating L1 English speakers' phonetic behaviour as *the* model to follow by the vast masses around the globe is apparently revealed by the following figures quoted by the author:

- there are 337 million L1 English speakers versus 1,350 million of L2 speakers if the criterion of 'reasonable competence' is applied, or
- according to a conservative estimate: the number of L2 speakers (with 'native-like' fluency) slightly exceeds that of L1 users (Jenkins 2000: 1).

The fact that most interactional exchanges in English nowadays take place among non-natives – i.e., English is used as an international language (EIL) – has, for Jenkins, obvious implications for the treatment of L1 transfer phenomena. In view of the above, one must no longer regard transfer as something that should be eradicated in the first place, since "[t]here is really no justification for doggedly persisting in referring to an item as 'an error' if the vast majority of the world's L2 English speakers produce and understand it" (2000: 160). Besides, the teacher's attempts to rid his students of interference errors are usually unrealistic, since many areas of English pronunciation are simply unteachable.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the claims concerning transfer, put forward by Jenkins 2000 (Section 3) and, subsequently (Section 4), confront those – largely theoretical – assumptions with the results of a quasi-longitudinal analysis of actual phonetic performance of Polish students of English.

2. Phonological features of the Lingua Franca Core

2.1. Phonological intelligibility in EIL

Since the role of a lingua franca is confined to that of an instrument serving the purpose of international communication, where no particular community of speakers is

a priori regarded as a model for imitation, the only requirement on EIL's phonic realisation is that it should ensure the minimum standard of mutual intelligibility. However, the basic phonetic material (the common core) on which the LFC speakers should draw is grounded in the two L1 reference accents, i.e. Received Pronunciation and General American. Jenkins (2000: 131) justifies this by claiming that this reliance on L1 accents is necessary "only to the extent that features of these varieties are shown in the [empirical] data to be crucial to intelligibility among L2 (NBES) speakers of English. Some RP/GA features clearly have the opposite effect while others appear to be inconsequential for international intelligibility".

Where international intelligibility does not seem to be jeopardised, the speakers are left free, or even encouraged, to use L1-derived phonetic features in their EIL speech.

2.2. Some segmental and suprasegmental features

On the basis of her own empirical research (of which, however, very little information is revealed), Jenkins (2000: 136-153; also Jenkins 2002: 96-97) selects the following phonetic features¹ to be shared by EIL speakers, in a system that is both simplified, by virtue of eliminating unnecessary complications (articulatorily marked sounds), and sufficient, in terms of respecting all the distinctions crucial to intelligibility:

(a) segmentals

- omission of dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ (and their replacement by a wide range of NL-derived variants);
- omission of dark [ɫ];
- rhoticity (which also means elimination of centring diphthongs);
- aspiration of fortis plosives;
- vowel length distinctions (dependent on the following consonant);
- consonant elision limited to final clusters involving /t/ or /d/ in the middle;
- vowel quantity over quality;

(b) suprasegmentals

- omission of weak forms (as potentially hindering intelligibility in EIL);
- omission of stress-timing;

¹ In fact, the following is just a selection of the LFC features; Jenkins' complete list of the core items is a bit longer.

- pitch movements (relating to intonation) not considered crucial to intelligibility, unlike
- nuclear (especially contrastive) stress.

Despite strong claims to the contrary, the LFC seems to be heavily biased towards the phonetic preferences of L1 speakers of English, thus revealing Jenkins's 'sugar-coated' approach to the subject of EIL – an approach she very much stigmatises in her 2004 article. This bias is particularly evident in the segmental section – for example, in Jenkins's (2000, 2002) insistence on aspiration, which is claimed to be vital for the fortis/lenis syllable-initial plosive distinction, although it is highly doubtful that this requirement holds for the majority of the world's languages, and it is definitely not a language universal. Those considerations, however, as well as the discussion of some other rather debatable assumptions behind the LFC paradigm, lie outside the scope of the present paper, and will thus not be handled in more detail here.²

3. Specific claims about L1 transfer

3.1. Transfer as a beneficial factor

Following the logic applied by the LFC advocates, there is no reason to look up to the L1 speaker as a pronunciation model, if a native interlocutor is no longer the default in conversational exchanges conducted in English. Consequently, there is nothing inherently wrong about NL phonic interference, as long as it does not lead to communication breakdown, that is, if it does not affect the crucial areas listed in II.2. On the contrary, Jenkins expresses the view that transfer is "deep-rooted and can be of benefit to learners" and thus "should not [...] be abandoned easily or willingly" (2000: 119).

As to the beneficial aspects of transfer – it both enriches the EIL phonetic repertoire, in the same way as regional variation does to L1 English, and allows the NBE speakers to preserve their national identity when using a foreign language, an issue widely discussed in SLA literature and summarised picturesquely by Daniels (1995; quoted in Jenkins 2000: 16) in the following way: "in retaining the sounds, the rhythms and the intonation of our mother tongue we avoid cutting the umbilical cord which ties us to our mother".

² A comprehensive discussion is offered by Sobkowiak (2003) and Szpyra-Kozłowska (2003); various other arguments against the LFC will also be found in Dziubalska-Kolaczyk and Przedlacka (forthcoming) – a volume containing the papers presented during the aforementioned PLM workshop.

3.2. Teachability and intelligibility

One of the practical arguments in favour of leaving the NBE speakers at liberty to use their L1 phonetic features in EIL, is that not only are the attempts to eradicate all instances of transfer unnecessary and harmful, but they are also unrealistic in the first place (Jenkins 2000: 1). Here the concept of (un)teachability is invoked to support this presumption. Certain items are claimed to be simply unteachable (in the sense that learning does not follow teaching), no matter how much classroom time is spent on practising them. Unteachability, however, should not be confused with unlearnability: any item might be learned as a result of extensive exposure to natural speech, but this is in no way a function of the efforts expended by the teacher in a phonetic lab.

As to the specification of the unteachable areas of English phonology, Jenkins speculates that "there seems to be a one-to-one correspondence between the *relevant* (items essential for EIL intelligibility) and the *realistic* (items which are teachable), and between the *irrelevant* and the *unrealistic*" (2000: 165f.; original italics). In those rare cases where an item is vital for intelligibility but might be difficult to teach by virtue of its phonetic markedness, motivation comes into play – in the sense of the students themselves feeling the necessity of mastering a given distinction – and the item becomes teachable (2000: 120).

The following section will verify the above suppositions against actual data on phonetic performance of Polish students of English.

4. Empirical verification: corpus data

4.1. About the corpus

The corpus consists of about 2 hours of recorded speech of thirteen first-year students of the School of English ('English Philology'), Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The recordings were transcribed phonetically by the present author, who relied primarily on auditory impressions, aided by some acoustic analyses conducted on digitised data. The samples were collected in two elicitation tasks, i.e. text reading and free oral production, which enables an analysis of stylistic variation in L2 production. There were two major recording sessions: one at the very beginning (October), and the other at the very end of the academic year in May.

In the eight-month period separating the two sessions the students attended a course in English segmental phonetics (4 hours a week), which is particularly crucial for the present paper by virtue of offering some insights into the subjects' phonetic

progress over time, with obvious implications for the 'teachable vs. unteachable' distinction.³

4.2. 'Irrelevant' vs. 'relevant' errors

The results of the corpus analysis have been thoroughly described elsewhere (e.g. Scheuer 1998a, b), so the present discussion will be confined to the data pertaining to two types of errors which may be regarded as representative of the 'irrelevant' and 'relevant' categories. The former is exemplified by 'th' (dental fricative) replacement. As repeatedly stated by Jenkins (2000, 2002), this phonetic deviation is inconsequential for international intelligibility, which – coupled with the inherent markedness of the required articulatory gesture – should render the item unteachable.

As for the 'relevant' errors, [i] for /ɪ/ substitution has been selected as an exemplar. This is a common mispronunciation in Polish learners of English, producing a wide range of unintended homophones of the *leave/live, steal/still* type. Since phonetically-unschooled Poles tend to make no distinction, either in quality or quantity, between the TL /ɪ/ or /i/, this may, and certainly does, lead to communication breakdown, and can thus be regarded as a potentially teachable area of English phonology.

It should be emphasised that, according to the subjects' teacher of phonetics, both problem areas received more or less equal amount of attention in the classroom, so any possible differences in their pronunciation accuracy cannot be attributed to a bias on the part of the instructor.

4.3. Results

(a) 'th'

The subjects' performance on this phonetic variable, in both elicitation tasks and at the two crucial points in time, is summarised in Table 1.

³ One might obviously argue that English philology students are not the most suitable candidates for the empirical testing of Jenkins's claims; after all, as prospective teachers of English, they are not *the* target population of the LFC proposals. However, it should be borne in mind that the students were being subjected to intense phonetic training at the time of the experiment, which – it may be claimed – makes them perfect subjects in studies gauging the effectiveness of explicit, classroom-based pronunciation teaching.

Table 1. Percentage of incorrect renditions of dental fricatives ('th')

Subject	October		May	
	Reading (%error)	Speaking (%error)	Reading (%error)	Speaking (%error)
1	70.0	67.4	38.7	69.0
2	73.7	47.7	33.3	40.0
3	83.3	58.3	80.6	81.0
4	87.1	62.5	67.7	48.4
5	60.5	65.0	51.4	50.0
6	28.6	27.0	5.3	13.9
7	36.5	27.3	39.6	26.3
8	50.0	26.7	47.5	40.9
9	83.3	65.2	60.0	21.2
10	33.3	38.9	0.0	0.0
11	73.9	56.5	33.3	100.0
12	65.0	55.2	36.8	28.6
13	85.7	91.7	80.8	51.2
MEAN	63.9	53.0	44.2	43.9
	58.5		44.1	

As is evident from the data in Table 1, the students' handling of the 'th's' did improve over the course of the 8 months separating the two recording sessions. The improvement is statistically significant for the two tasks lumped together (44.1% incorrect realisations in May compared to 58.5% in October; $p < .005$), as well as for 'reading' considered in isolation (44.2% and 63.9% respectively; $p < .005$). The change in 'speaking' performance, however, failed to reach the threshold of statistical significance, although the raw numbers point to a strong trend in the right direction (a fall from 53% in October to 43.9% in May), which is graphically presented in Figure 1.

The advantage of 'reading' over 'speaking' comes hardly as a surprise, in view of a substantial body of SLA literature attesting more target-like performance on tasks that allow higher degrees of monitoring (see e.g., Preston 1996 for a summary).

On the whole we may conclude that, contrary to the pattern hypothesised by Jenkins (2000), the English dental fricatives responded well to phonetic treatment, and turned out to be the problematic, but teachable areas of TL phonology.

(b) [i] for /ɪ/

Table 2 contains the data on the proportion of incorrect [i] for /ɪ/ substitutions on the four occasions. It should be stressed that the subjects did not generally differentiate between TL /i/ and /ɪ/ length-wise, which for Jenkins would have been – presuma-

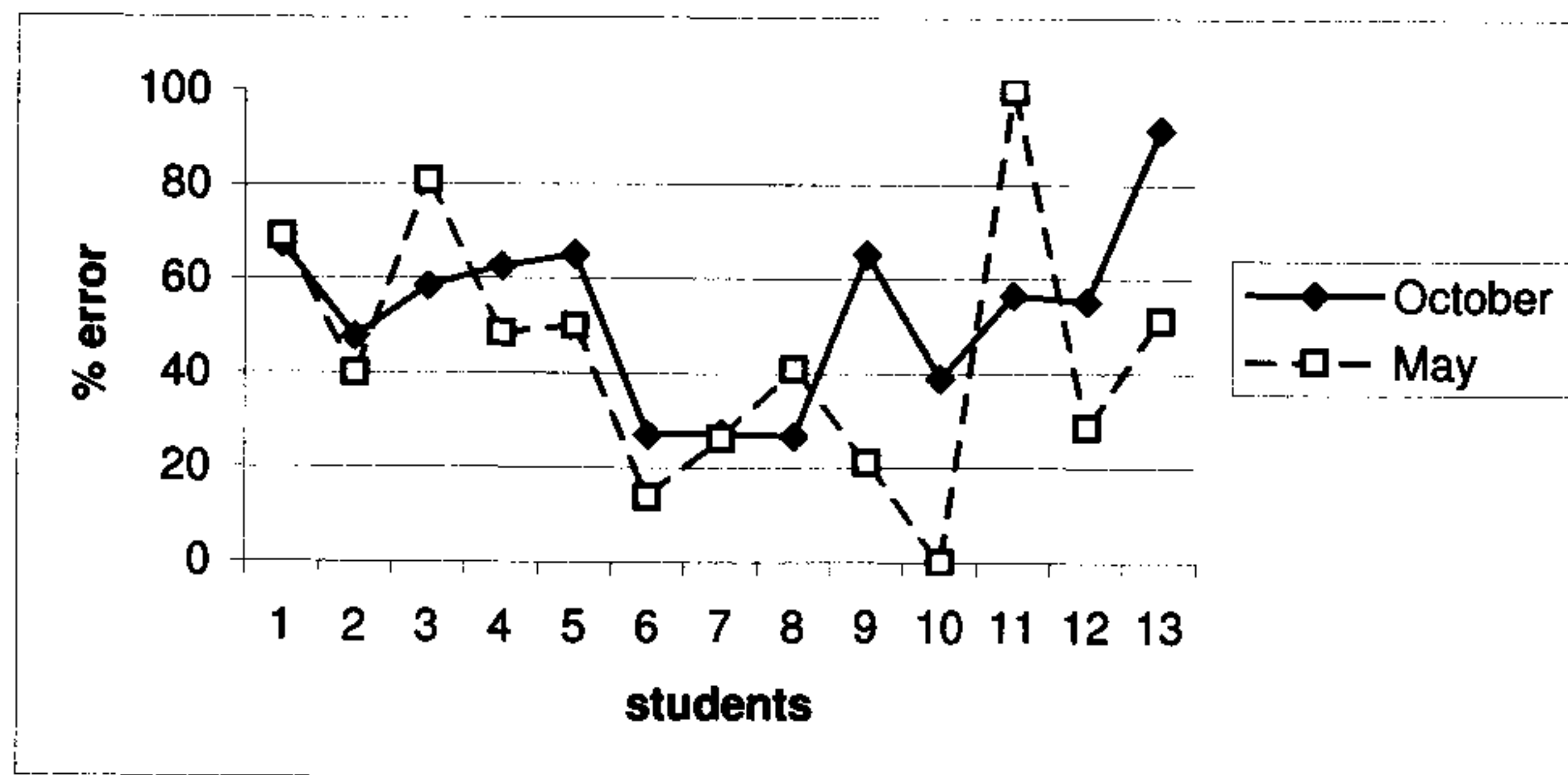


Figure 1. Percentage of incorrect renditions of 'th's' in 'speaking' for October and May

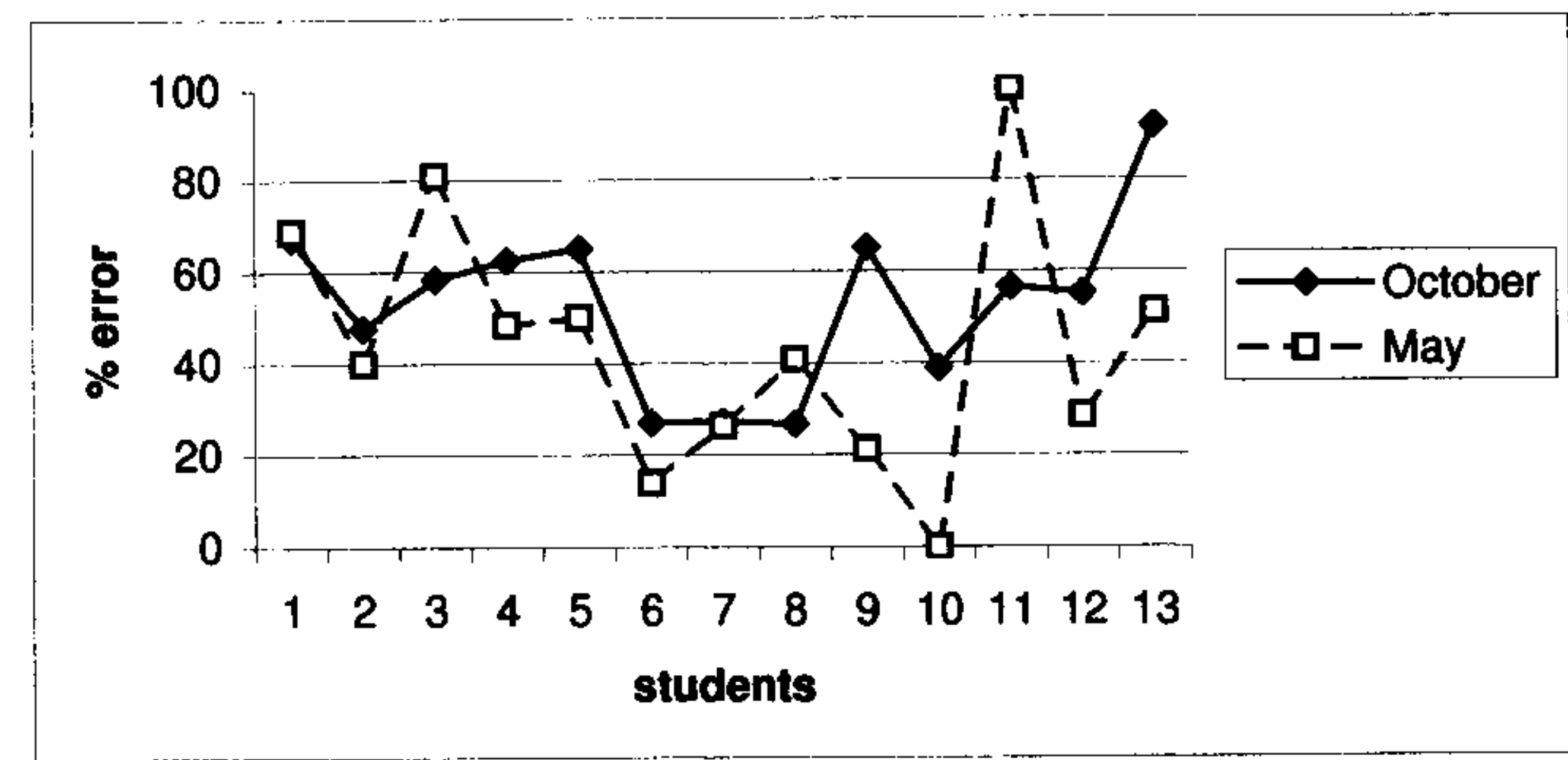


Figure 2. Percentage of incorrect [i] for /ɪ/ substitutions in 'speaking' for October and May

Table 2. Percentage of [i] for /ɪ/ substitutions

Subject	October		May	
	Reading (%error)	Speaking (%error)	Reading (%error)	Speaking (%error)
1	23.8	31.1	15.4	33.8
2	46.0	37.5	44.9	49.3
3	50.0	33.9	27.3	39.2
4	36.7	14.0	31.9	26.8
5	47.5	43.8	16.1	43.8
6	39.0	39.7	35.6	43.2
7	59.6	44.4	35.7	46.9
8	16.7	12.1	18.2	26.2
9	49.1	44.3	46.6	22.2
10	26.1	49.4	12.0	27.8
11	54.3	25.0	47.1	44.7
12	17.0	19.2	15.6	18.4
13	36.7	15.9	25.0	20.5
MEAN	38.7	31.6	28.6	34.1
	35.1		31.3	

bly – of more fundamental importance than the presence or absence of the qualitative contrast. Thus, in the case of what is counted, in the present analysis, as an erroneous rendition of the short vowel, the phonemic distinction between English /i:/ and /ɪ/ was blurred on both dimensions.

The pattern of variation in the rendition of this phonetic variable is somewhat puzzling. Although the raw numbers, averaged for the two elicitation tasks, point to

an improvement over time (a fall in error frequency from 35.1% in October to 31.3% in May), the difference is statistically non-significant. What is highly statistically significant, however, is an interaction effect between 'time' and 'style' (2-way ANOVA, $p < .01$). That is to say, the frequency of [i] substitutions fell by a quarter in 'reading' – from 38.7% in October to 28.6% in May, but considerably rose in 'speaking' – from 31.6% in October to 34.1% in May, i.e., by as much as 8% (see Figure 2). No ready explanation can be offered for this rather intriguing pattern. A possible attempt at an answer could be that the increase in overall TL fluency in the subjects, gained after attending several one-year-long practical English courses, resulted in an increase in TL self-confidence and, consequently, a decrease in the level of attention given to form in the students' TL performance. Since this level of attention is generally lower in 'speaking' than in 'reading', the reduction in pronunciation monitoring affects the accuracy more strongly in the spoken than in the read-out part. Why this process should operate selectively on the realisation of TL /ɪ/ (no such deterioration was noted for the rendition of TL consonants or other vowels, examined by the author), remains yet to be established.

Needless to say, the results run counter to the pattern expected by Jenkins (2000). In spite of the error's indisputable 'relevance', the students were not motivated enough to render the item teachable within the period of time covered by the study. In fact, over time, the effects of L1 transfer became even more marked in the case of 'speaking', which was after all the task more representative of the students' actual communicative performance.⁴

⁴ Obviously, one could question whether the error is indeed motivated by L1 transfer. In the author's opinion it is, although in a slightly more complex way: it consists in a substitution of an L1 sound ([i]) for a TL sound (/ɪ/), motivated by the transfer of NL grapheme-to-phoneme conversion pattern.

5. Concluding remarks

The aim of the paper was to provide some empirical material against which to verify Jenkins's (2000) presumptions concerning the feasibility of eradicating certain types of pronunciation errors motivated by L1 transfer. The corpus data did not, however, lend support to the claims speculating the unteachability of the TL items whose mastery is inessential to EIL intelligibility. Leaving aside the very issue of whether there are indeed any pronunciation errors that are totally inconsequential for communication (as this has been called into question; see e.g. Beebe 1987), we may safely conclude that Jenkins's classic example of 'irrelevant' item – the English dental fricative – shows every sign of teachability in the corpus analysed in the present paper. Conversely, the distinction between TL /i:/ and /ɪ/, crucial to intelligibility according to Jenkins's criteria, turns out to be virtually unmasterable during the 8-month period of intense phonetic training.

One cannot help the impression that Jenkins's line of reasoning, in respect of the 'teachable vs. unteachable' distinction, removes a substantial burden of responsibility from the teacher of phonetics, who faces an easy task in the case of the 'relevant' areas (students are highly motivated themselves and learn without difficulty), whereas in the case of the 'irrelevant' may spare him/herself the vain effort involved in engaging in a task that is doomed to failure, anyway. The results of the study described above challenge this fundamental assumption underlying the Lingua Franca Core paradigm, which was the main thrust of the paper.

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