"I've seen it all before", or: on the phonetic profile of the first-year student

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Abstract: The paper reports on a quasi-longitudinal study of phonetic performance of first-year students of the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The main goal of the analysis was to compare the pronunciation accuracy of two groups of subjects, separated by 8 years, with a view to checking if any marked differences can be detected in this respect. Another aim was to measure the improvement in the subjects' pronunciation skills, effected by a few months of intensive phonetic training in English.

I. Introduction

There is a prevailing view, popular with university teachers and supported by lots of anecdotal evidence, that EFL learners leaving Polish secondary school and beginning their philological studies display ever greater language competence each year. There are several good and interrelated reasons why such beliefs should be widespread and well-founded. Among these, one may list the fact that the access to authentic language materials has improved dramatically over the past years, as has foreign travel and overall mobility. All of the above create ample opportunities for L2 acquisition, as well motivate the learners in terms demonstrating the – practical or potential – usefulness of knowing a foreign language, and English in particular. Related to the above is the increased emphasis placed on speaking English, both at school and later on the job market, which is in turn enhanced by the socio-economic and political factors, making EFL fluency a valuable asset. On a more pragmatic level, of great significance is the fact that the number and availability of fully qualified English teachers has been growing rapidly over the past years. It stands to reason that all these developments should jointly contribute to the Polish secondary school leavers showing better EFL skills now than their counterparts did several years ago.

The present study constitutes an attempt to check if any spectacular improvement in pronunciation accuracy displayed by the beginning English philology students can indeed be found, or the evidence testifying to a marked change in this area remains impressionistic. To this end, the author decided to compare the phonetic performance of a group of first-year students AD 1995 (thoroughly discussed in Scheuer 1998) with that of their counterparts 8 years later, i.e. recorded in October 2003. Another goal of the study was to provide further empirical data against which to verify certain hypotheses concerning the pattern of L2

variation and change across time. In other words, the aim was to check if, how, and to what extent phonetic competence responds to formal training. This was achieved by gauging the students' pronunciation both at the very beginning (October) and at the very end (May) of the academic year, with an intensive 8-month course in English segmental phonetics intervening between the two points in time.

Since the population of subjects involved in the previous (1995/6) study was rather small (13 speakers), any conclusions drawn from that experiment must necessary be tentative and treated with due caution. Hence it seemed advisable to collect another body of data, in order to ascertain if the patterns of acquisition of selected phonetic variables observed then were rather accidental, or whether they signalled a more general and recurrent picture, which will thus re-emerge 8 years later. Further empirical evidence was particularly vital, since the outcomes of the previous study ran counter either to certain deep-rooted beliefs held by many EFL teachers, or to certain hypotheses concerning the acquisition of the English sound system, proposed by influential scholars, such as Jennifer Jenkins, with her 'teachable vs. unteachable' classification of various aspects of English phonetics.

Jenkins's influential Lingua Franca Core (LFC) paradigm, elaborated in her seminal 2000 book, and reiterated in her later publications (e.g. 2002), constitutes yet another attempt to simplify the inventory of segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation to be acquired by foreign learners for the purpose of communicating with other non-native speakers. The author herself characterises the proposal as one which will "drastically reduce the pronunciation teaching load" (2000: 145) by virtue of eliminating unnecessary complications and items that are anyway 'unteachable', but which will, at the same time, salvage international intelligibility, in terms of respecting all the crucial distinctions. As for 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). The more detailed phonetic/phonological features of the LFC, as well as the viability of the model as such, have been commented on by other authors in a number of recent articles (e.g. Sobkowiak 2003, *in press*, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2003, *in press*, or Dziubalska-Kołaczyk and Przedlacka *in press*), so there is no need to repeat the argumentation here. The study outlined below provides some empirical verification of the claims positing the 'unteachability' of the 'irrelevant' items.

II. Procedure

1. The data

The table below offers an overview of the speech materials that were used in the 1995/6 and 2003/04 recording sessions.

	1995/96 (Group 1)	**2003/04 (Group 2)**
subjects	13	11
time	October & May	October & May
tasks	text reading & speaking	text reading & word list reading

On both occasions the speech samples were collected from comparable groups of first-year students of English philology (School of English) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The majority of the subjects were 19 years old at the time of the first recording session in October. There was only one male subject in each group, as well as only one person who had ever spent more than a month in an English-speaking country, prior to the experiment. Both groups were recorded in two elicitation tasks: Group 1 (1995/96) in text reading and free speech, whereas Group 2 (2003/04) in text and word list reading. The texts were of equivalent length (about 250 words each) and level of formality, the word list consisted of 30 words or phrases, and the 'free speech' tasks involved the students in talking either about their recent summer holidays (October 1995) or their general impressions after the first year at university (May 1996)[1].

2. The analysis

The recorded samples were transcribed phonetically by the present author, who relied primarily on her auditory impressions, and – when need arose – on a spectrographic analysis of digitised data[2]. The measure of phonetic accuracy adopted in the study was the students' performance on two phonetic variables: (1) the dental fricatives (so-called 'th'-sounds), and (2) the /i:/ versus /I/ distinction (as in the 'beat' vs. 'bit' opposition).

While this choice is to some extent arbitrary, there are a few good reasons why the analysis of these particular L2 areas might be insightful. First of all, the substitutions of various consonants for the English dentals, as well as the replacement of /I/ by [i] belong to the most common errors in Polish (and certainly not only these) EFL learners. At he same time, however, the 'th's belong to the few pronunciation areas that generally receive some

attention on the part of secondary school teachers. In this way, there is reason to expect the students at least to be aware of the L2 pronunciation target.

The two types of error ('th' and 'i') are also convenient in the context of verifying the LFC assumptions, as they may be regarded as representative of the 'irrelevant' and 'relevant' categories, respectively. As repeatedly stated by Jenkins (2000, 2002), dental fricative replacement is inconsequential for international intelligibility, which – coupled with the inherent markedness of the required articulatory gesture – should render the item unteachable. [i] for /I/ substitution, in turn, has a great potential to produce numerous unintended homophones of the *leave/live*, *steal/still* type, and to blur intelligibility as a consequence. Phonetic accuracy in this respect may thus be classified as 'relevant', making the distinction highly teachable.

It should be stressed, however, that neither the word list nor the texts were deliberately selected or constructed in order to check these particular phonetic variables. In other words, the speech materials were by no means saturated with an abundance of words demanding the production of dental fricatives or short /I/ vowels.

III. Are the 2003 students superior to those from 1995?

In order to examine how (if at all) the phonetic competence of Polish secondary school leavers improved with time, a comparison between the two respective 'October' result sets was drawn. Since such an analysis only makes sense in reference to equivalent tasks, the text reading data alone were considered.

The mean frequencies of errors for the two groups are as follows:

(a) 'th':

- October 1995 (Group 1): **63.9 %** error
- October 2003 (Group 2): **53.7 %** error

On the face of it, the frequency of this phonetic deviation seems to be markedly lower in Group 2, compared to Group 1. However, even though the 2003 freshmen did produce fewer erroneous substitutions for dental fricatives than their counterparts 8 years before, the difference fails to reach the threshold of statistical significance, and we are thus forced to conclude that no real improvement was found in this area of L2 phonetics. Figure 1 below illustrates this – as it turns out, only apparent – difference.

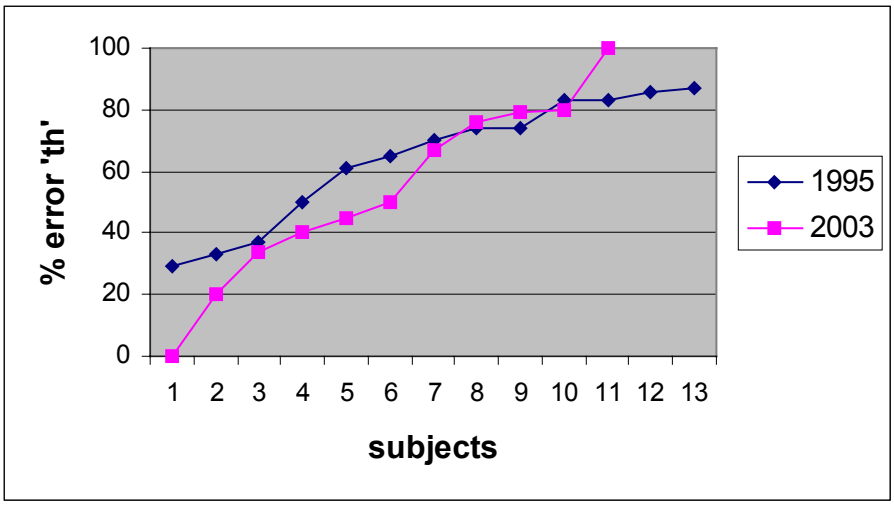

Figure 1. Frequency of the 'th' error in 1995 and 2003 (text reading)

(b) 'i':

- October 1995 (Group 1): **38.7 %** error
- October 2003 (Group 2): **32.6 %** error

Once again, the 2003 results appear more promising than their predecessors, but yet again the promise remains unfulfilled, in that the difference proves statistically non-significant. Hence, as in the case of the 'th's, the conclusion drawn from the analysis must be that the error rate stayed on the same level in the two experimental groups. This is reflected in Figure 2, where the shapes of the two curves are strikingly similar.

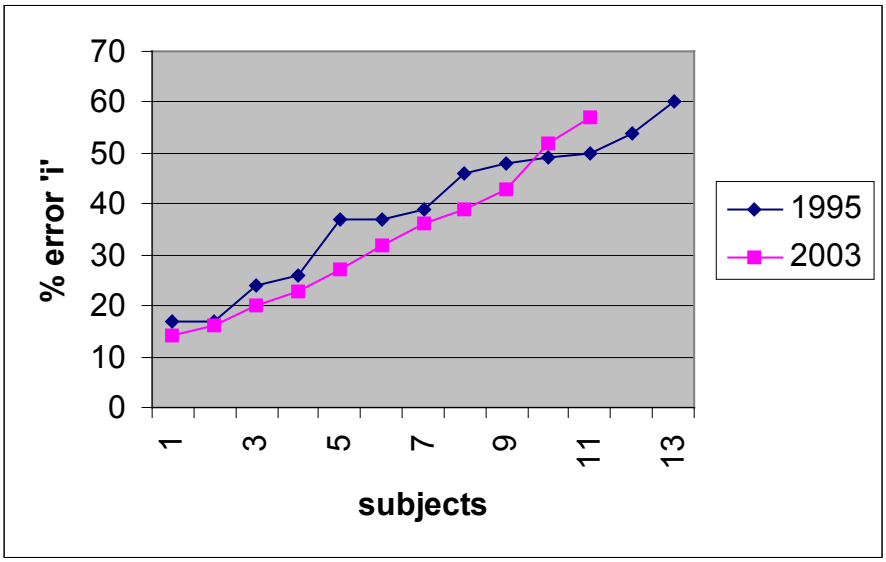

Figure 2. Frequency of the 'i' error in 1995 and 2003 (text reading)

In this context it is essential to observe that there are (at least) two dimensions to an error in the attempted L2 English vowel production, namely quality and quantity. Out of the two, it is the latter – i.e., length – that seems to figure more prominently in Jenkins's intelligibility hierarchy (e.g. 2000: 132, 144)[3]. Disappointingly, however, the analysis did not identify quantity as a variable used by the subjects contrastively, in signalling the TL /I/ vs. /i:/ distinctions; hence, vowel quality is the only phonetic clue considered in gathering this part of the data.

IV. Is phonetics teachable?

The other research question concerned the degree of improvement in the students' performance, observed after their completion of the 1st-year practical phonetics course. Again, the main objective was to obtain an answer to the question whether the hypothesised improvement follows similar patterns in both groups, and whether these patterns lend support to Jenkins's '(un)teachability' claims, which – even in Jenkins's (2000) own opinion – were in need of empirical verification.

1. 'th': May versus October

(a) Group 1: 1995/96

- Text reading:

October: **63.9%** error

May: **44.2%** error

The results point to an improvement in the subjects' performance over the course of the academic year, and the difference is statistically highly significant at $p<.005$.

- Speaking:

October: **53%** error

May: **43.9%** error

Again, the raw numbers seem to indicate a drop in the error frequency over time. The difference, however, fails to reach the level of statistical significance and has to be regarded as potentially accidental.

(b) Group 2: 2003/04

Text reading:

October: **53.7%** error

May: **8.9 %** error

There is a dramatic decrease in the error rate between the beginning and the end of the academic year, which denotes a very highly significant improvement at p<.0005. Unfortunately, the data pertaining to the other elicitation task (i.e., word list reading) are not analysed here, due to a very low token frequency of dental fricatives in the tested items.

The degrees of change in phonetic accuracy in the 2 groups are strikingly different, but they may obviously be due to the varying emphasis laid on dental fricatives by the two (different) practical phonetics teachers, and hence are not straightforwardly comparable. As for the teachability of this phonetic variable, the above results are somewhat inconclusive. Since, in the case of reading, the subjects demonstrated a markedly higher degree of control of the target consonants, one must conclude that the teaching (and learning) process had the desirable effect, and the infamous English interdentals do not deserve the label 'unteachable'[4]. On the other hand, it is free speech that offers a truer measure of the actual 'competence of performance' in real life communicative exchanges, and this task does not seem to be vastly affected by formal training. The absence of an equivalent elicitation task in the 2003/04 corpus, which would offer further empirical evidence in this respect, was obviously a major weakness of the study.

2. 'i': May versus October

(a) Group 1: 1995/96

- Text reading:

October: **38.7%** error

May: **28.6%** error

- Speaking:

October: **31.6%** error

May: **34.1%** error

The results obtained for the two tasks have to be considered jointly, since 2-way ANOVA revealed an interaction effect between the variable 'time' and 'task'. The effect is significant (p<.01), which means that although the frequency of [i] substitutions fell by a quarter in reading (from 38.7% in October to 28.6% in May), it considerably rose in speaking – from 31.6% in October to 34.1% in May, i.e. by as much as 8%. It is difficult to offer a satisfactory explanation of this rather intriguing pattern of deterioration over time, which also provides counter evidence to the claims positing the teachability of a 'relevant' phonetic item, if international intelligibility is at stake. One must, however, do justice to Jenkins, who did realise that the English short /I/ vowel posed a widespread problem to EIL users, and hence

speculated that this sound may "not ultimately form part of the 'Euro-English' vowel inventory" (2001: 18), in spite of the /I/-/i:/ confusion potentially contributing to communication difficulties[5].

(b) Group 2: 2003/04

- Text reading:

October: **32.6%** error

May: **14.3%** error

- Word list reading:

October: **34.5%** error

May: **18.5%** error

Both sets of figures indicate a substantial improvement over time (at $p<.0005$ and $p<.025$, respectively), but it has to be borne in mind that this change can only be posited for reading, which – as we saw earlier – offers no valuable insights into the subjects' performance in more spontaneous tasks like free oral production, on which no data is available for Group 2.

The analysis of the rate of [i] for /I/ substitutions in May 2004 shows another unexpected finding. The mean frequency of this error in word list reading (**18.5%**) is higher than in text reading (**14.3%**), even though the reverse pattern would normally be expected. Although the result is slightly below the threshold of statistical significance, the difference is still puzzling, since it is precisely word lists that allow higher degree of pronunciation monitoring and are thus likely to induce more target-like L2 performance than any other elicitation task. Figure 3 below illustrates the relationship between the two reading exercises for Group 2.

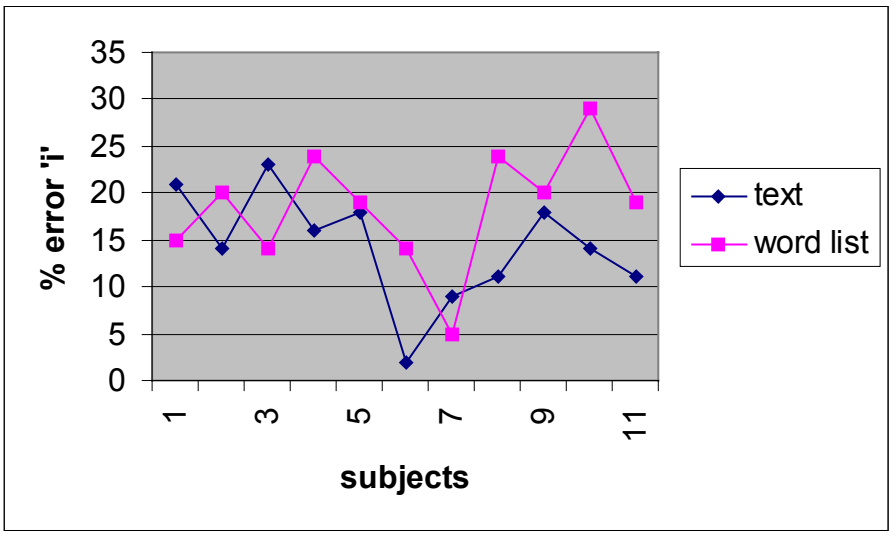

Figure 3. Frequency of the 'i' error in text vs. word list reading (May 2004)

The above analysis points to the [i] for /I/ substitution as a particularly deceptive error in the course of acquisition of the English sound system: even though it seems to have been eradicated in some contexts, it reappears with increased intensity in other L2 production tasks. In the case of Polish learners, the /I/-words complexity is certainly enhanced by orthography, with the overwhelmingly frequent <i> spelling (as in 'sick', 'think', 'river', etc.) favouring the automatic [i] interpretation. However, this factor alone does not account for all the peculiarities alluded to before, and definitely not for a decline in pronunciation accuracy over time.

V. Conclusion

The analysis outlined above admittedly suffers from a number of limitations, which precludes the possibility of drawing any strong conclusions. The assessment of the phonetic performance of 1st-year students was confined to two types of errors, appearing in the speech of two small groups of subjects, sampled in two elicitation tasks, of which only one was held (relatively) constant throughout the whole study. The picture remains at best incomplete, in that neither the subjects, nor the phonetic variables investigated in the experiment are claimed to be necessarily representative of their respective populations. Having stated this, it must be pointed out that all the students involved had gone through a rather careful selection process (in the form of the university entrance examinations) and had been drawn from various geographical locations[6]. This means that their October pronunciation cannot be totally detached from the average level of phonetic competence displayed by the best secondary school leavers in Poland. Even if the present results were to some extent accidental, we may safely conclude that no spectacular, across-the-board increase in the EFL phonetic skills of the Polish teenager has occurred in the past several years. This obviously does not imply that no such improvement may have taken place in other areas of L2 competence. After all, the (presumably) greater availability of, and exposure to, linguistic input may have resulted in the overall greater fluency or richer vocabulary at the learner's disposal, while pronunciation remains – as ever – the unmistakable hallmark of non-native speech. On a more positive note, we may observe that the 2003 vs. 1995 comparison indicates a strong trend in the right direction, in that the raw numbers signify a drop in the errors' frequencies[7], and that the errors prove responsive to formal phonetic treatment, which was evident in the May vs. October contrasts. Needless to say, more extensive research is vital in order to verify the results obtained in the present study.

Notes:

[1] For the sake of clarity it should be added that each subject in Group 1 was asked to read a different – although entirely comparable – text, whereas in the case of Group 2 both the text and the word list were the same for each student. Apart from this, the 2003/04 subjects were also recorded in two Polish reading tasks, but the results of this part of the experiment are naturally ignored in the present paper.

[2] Actually, the 1995/96 recordings were transcribed in their entirety, whereas in 2003/04 only the relevant phonetic variables were considered.

[3] I am grateful to Dr. Ewa Waniek-Klimczak for pointing this out to me.

[4] The '(un)teachability' dimension of the 1995/96 study (with a view to verifying Jenkins's LFC assumptions) is discussed in more detail in Scheuer (in press).

[5] EIL stands for English as an International Language, whereas 'Euro-English' is conceptualised as an emerging variety of EIL, used as a European lingua franca (e.g., Seidlhofer 2001: 14).

[6] Interestingly, only 4 – out of the 24 – subjects considered in the whole study came from Poznań.

[7] In fact, even the apparently negligible 1995 vs. 2003 error frequency differences might have proved statistically significant, had the subjects been more numerous. I am indebted to Dr. Wiktor Gonet for bringing this possibility to my attention.

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