

## PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF POLGLISH

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### *Introduction*

The volume *Teaching and Researching the Pronunciation of English – Studies in Honour of Włodzimierz Sobkowiak* is a collection of mainly phonetic-based studies carried out primarily by Polish researchers. The volume is divided into two sections, with Part 1 concentrating on teaching English pronunciation and Part 2 focusing more on research. The preface by the editors, Ewa Waniek-Klimczak and Mirosław Pawlak, provides an effective overview of the collection, remarking astutely that, despite the relative demise of the native-speaker model, the studies attest to the vigorous health of contemporary pronunciation teaching and research. Considerable credit for this state of affairs in Poland can be attributed to the ground-breaking practical and theoretical work of Włodzimierz Sobkowiak, particularly in his influential *English Phonetics for Poles* (1996), so it is highly appropriate that the volume is dedicated to him.

Broadly speaking, the first three studies in Part 1 (Pawlak *et al.*; Waniek-Klimczak *et al.*; Baran-Łucarz *et al.*) are concerned with learners' beliefs and attitudes towards pronunciation teaching, with the third paper in addition evaluating the benefits of a particular technology ('clickers') in the phonetics classroom. The next three studies (Cunningham; Nowacka; Tergujeff) focus on materials and resources for teaching pronunciation, and the final paper in the section (Furtak) recommends using Polish orthography to elucidate English pronunciation.

While the first paper in Part 2 (Scheuer) is concerned with determining priorities for the pronunciation classroom, the next three (Zajac; Porzuczek; Waniek-Klimczak) are inspired by Sobkowiak's list of *Words Commonly Mispronounced* by Polish learners, published as an appendix to *English Phonetics for Poles*. The final four studies (Schwartz; Shockey; Rojczyk; Dziubalska-Kołaczyk *et al.*) focus on various phonetic details of English segments that distinguish them from their Polish counterparts.

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With the exception of the papers by Cunningham (dealing with L1 Swedish learners) and Tergujeff (L1 Finnish), as well as Shockey's paper on phonetic details of L1 English, all of the studies focus on the learning of English pronunciation by L1 Polish learners. Nonetheless, the pronunciation topics covered are of wide interest, and the studies are pertinent to the acquisition of English pronunciation by learners with other L1s. I trust the following synopses of the studies will support this contention.

### *Synopses of the studies*

Part 1 opens with a study by Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Bielak (*Exploring Advanced Learners' Beliefs About Pronunciation Instruction and Their Relationship with Attainment*) that investigates the influence of learners' beliefs on the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction. Information on beliefs was gathered via a questionnaire administered to Polish university students of English with Likert-scale items targeting various aspects of pronunciation instruction. Attainment, and hence the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction, was measured via the pronunciation component of a year-end exam. While the study did not find any significant correlation between learners' beliefs and performance on the exam, the questionnaire did permit a complex picture of these beliefs to be developed.

The second paper, Waniek-Klimczak, Rojczyk and Porzuczek's '*Polglish' in Polish Eyes: What English Studies Majors Think About Their Pronunciation in English*', likewise reports on the results of a questionnaire investigating the attitudes and beliefs of Polish university students regarding their English pronunciation. Not surprisingly, a large majority of these English majors expressed a desire for correct pronunciation, even if considerable effort is required to attain the goal. More specifically, the study focuses on the relation between either level of study (BA vs. MA) or gender on the one hand and students' attitudes and beliefs on the other. These variables were found to exert an influence in two areas. First, BA students expressed a greater concern than MA students over the presence of Polish features in their English pronunciation, a finding the authors attribute to a change in attitudes towards 'Polglish' as students advance in their studies. Second, gender was found to play a role in self-assessment as females rated their own pronunciation more severely than males.

In the third paper (*Teaching English Phonetics with a Learner Response System*), Baran-Łucarz, Czajka and Cardoso explore the benefits of incorporating technology in the form of a Learner Response System ('clickers') into the second language classroom. Clickers are handheld devices

that permit students to vote anonymously on questions set by the teacher. After the polling period, a central receiver tallies the responses, and the results can be projected for all to see. While the system encourages student participation and provides instant feedback, the question is: To what extent do clickers promote learning? And moreover: What are students' attitudes toward the use of clickers?

To investigate these questions, the researchers taught two phonetics classes to two groups of university English majors: an experimental PowerPoint-plus-clicker group and a PowerPoint-only control group. Participants completed a pretest and immediate and delayed post-tests on the material covered in class, and they filled out a questionnaire that probed their attitudes regarding clicker use. Although the tendency for the clicker group to outperform the no-clicker group in the post-tests was generally not significant, the results nonetheless point to clicker use being potentially beneficial. From the questionnaires and from the researchers' classroom observations, a portrait also emerges of clickers having a positive impact on student motivation and engagement in the classroom.

Next, Cunningham (*Teaching English Pronunciation Online to Swedish Primary-School Teachers*) provides a description of an online pronunciation course designed for primary school teachers and teacher trainees in Sweden. The explicit aim of the course is to develop the knowledge of English pronunciation necessary for teaching, but also indirectly to sensitize teachers to their own pronunciation problems, including both segmental and prosodic issues, whether these actually interfere with intelligibility or simply create a strong impression of a Swedish accent.

Subsequently, in *English Phonetic and Pronunciation Resources for Polish Learners in the Past and Present*, Nowacka presents an overview of phonetic and pronunciation material targeting learners of English in Poland and stretching back to 1924, including particularly treatment of the TRAP vowel over time. Most of the textbooks to some degree cover IPA transcription, segmental or (to a lesser degree) suprasegmental issues, spelling-sound correspondences, and connected speech phenomena such as linking and assimilation. A general inclination is observed for targeting Received Pronunciation over General American. Colloquial fast speech phenomena, such as reductions that can interfere with L2 learners' comprehension of native speakers, are rarely broached, and the same can be said of intonation. Interestingly, audiolingual-style drills continue to be favoured in recent textbooks over more communicative pronunciation activities.

With regard to the EFL context at the lower secondary level in Finland, Tergujeff (*Good Servants but Poor Masters: On the Important Role of*

*Textbooks in Teaching English Pronunciation*) examines the occurrence of different activity types and pronunciation topics in three contexts: in textbooks used in high schools, in observations of two teachers in the classroom, and in interviews on pronunciation with high school students. She observes that teachers rarely deviate from the task types and topics that are included in textbooks, and these biases are also reflected in learners' reflections on pronunciation. The results point to a central role for textbooks in determining classroom objectives and practices.

Closing out Part 1, Furtak (*In Defense of the Usefulness of a Polish-Based Respelling Phonetic System in the Elementary to Lower-Intermediate EFL Classroom*) argues in favour of using Polish orthography rather than the IPA to present an at least approximate pronunciation of English words to lower-level learners. By drawing on a code the learners are already familiar with, the technique simplifies the learning task, with the result that learners are less discouraged and more motivated. The approach is especially appropriate for learners at lower levels of proficiency, where mispronunciations due to English orthography are frequent. Overall, Polish orthography is argued to be an efficient means of promoting sufficient pronunciation accuracy for learners to communicate effectively.

In Part 2, the emphasis shifts from teaching to research into pronunciation, although the shift is only partial: generally the studies contained in the second half of the volume also explore implications for the second language classroom. The first paper, Scheuer's *What to Teach and What Not to Teach, Yet Again: On the Elusive Priorities for L2 English Phonetics*, is a case in point. Based primarily on recordings of Polish university students, Scheuer focuses on determining priorities for pronunciation teaching according to three criteria: the contribution of an error to the impression of foreign accent; the effect on intelligibility; and the negative reactions an error triggers in listeners. To elaborate, features of speech that create an impression of foreign accent do not necessarily affect intelligibility. Likewise, listeners may or may not be bothered or irritated by a particular feature. Interestingly, interdental substitution contributed to an impression of foreign accent more among Polish raters than among native English raters. Another factor taken into consideration is teachability – there is no point in devoting time and effort to pronunciation areas that are thoroughly resistant to acquisition. In brief, the aim of the research is to help teachers make informed choices as to what to cover in the limited classroom time available.

Zajac's paper, *Compiling a Corpus-Based List of Words Commonly Mispronounced*, is the first of three studies in the volume concerned with

particular words that Poles frequently mispronounce. Zajac has compiled a list of the 50 most commonly mispronounced words occurring in the Polish Learner English Corpus, a collection of interviews with adolescent and adult learners of English. The resulting list diverges considerably from Sobkowiak's 600-word list of *Words Commonly Mispronounced*, which was based on the researcher's personal experience and which includes rare words unlikely to be found in a corpus of learner speech. Two types of error are included on the corpus-based list: segmental substitutions and incorrect word stress. In contrast with Sobkowiak's list, typical Polish mispronunciations (e.g., predictable substitutions of interdentals) are overlooked. Instead, errors triggered primarily by orthography are included. These misconstrued pronunciations of words stem either from application of Polish sound-spelling conventions or from over-application of English pronunciation patterns (e.g., *broad* realized with [o], following words like *road* and *load*). As the author acknowledges, the accuracy of the corpus-based approach depends on how representative the corpus is of learner speech in general.

The next paper, Porzuczek's *Handling Global and Local English Pronunciation Errors*, is also concerned with common mispronunciations. Making a distinction between global errors (regular substitutions associated with Polish-accented speech) and local errors (exceptional, word-specific mispronunciations), Porzuczek examines Sobkowiak's list of *Words Commonly Mispronounced* in search of regularities among the apparently idiosyncratic local errors. The proposal is that any patterns that emerge can become the focus of effective instruction. Three types of local error are identified. First, true local errors are due to entirely idiosyncratic English spelling-sound correspondences and need to be memorized one-by-one. Next, either-or local errors arise due to spellings that commonly have two possible pronunciations (e.g., the sequence *-ow* in *low* and *cow*). Finally, avoidable (globalized) errors can be prevented by paying attention to certain well-established patterns, such as that *b* is silent in final *-mb* sequences (*lamb*, *bomb*, *comb*). Either-or and globalized errors can be the target of classroom activities based on the patterns as a whole, rather than just individual items.

Likewise using words selected from Sobkowiak's list of *Words Commonly Mispronounced*, Waniek-Klimczak's study (*Factors Affecting Word Stress Recognition by Advanced Learners of English*) investigates the ability of English majors at a Polish university to identify correctly and incorrectly stressed items. Specifically, three factors were found to exert an interacting

influence: the amount of explicit phonetic instruction the learners had received; the source of the error (transfer of the L1 antepenultimate stress rule or else overgeneralization of L2 patterns); and word frequency. Briefly, overgeneralization errors were found to be more problematic than those due to L1 transfer, degree of instruction mainly impacted recognition of incorrect rather than correct stress, and word frequency also contributed to relative difficulty of the task.

The next four studies are primarily concerned with phonetic details of learner and L1 English pronunciation. In *Vowel Dynamics for Polish Learners of English*, Schwartz presents the results of an acoustic and a perceptual (accent-judgment) study of English vowel production by Polish learners. English vowels being characterized by more dynamic formant movement than Polish vowels, the acoustic study analyzes the degree of changes in formant frequencies in the vowel productions of learners at two levels of proficiency, finding significantly greater formant movement in vowels produced by the more advanced learners. For the perceptual study, native speakers rated items with less dynamic vowel realizations as significantly more accented. Schwartz also offers an innovative explanation for the difference between Polish and English vowels stemming from distinctions in the phonological representation.

Next, with implications for language teaching, Shockey's *A Personal Note on the Larynx as Articulator in English* draws our attention to various gradient phonetic details characteristic of spoken English involving the larynx, including context-dependent degrees of aspiration of voiceless plosives, devoicing of obstruents, and glottalization of final stops.

Relatedly, in *Using FL Accent Imitation in L1 in Foreign-Language Speech Research*, Rojczyk examines the production of voiceless stops /p t k/ by Polish speakers imitating an English accent in Polish. The aim was to see whether they would realize these stops with the longer lag VOT characteristic of English. Significant differences were found between Polish and English-accented Polish, showing that VOT is a salient feature of English pronunciation for learners. A positive correlation was also found between the participants' VOTs in English-accented Polish and in English speech, which indicates that an elicited L2 accent in the L1 can provide accurate measures of actual L2 acquisition.

Finally, with regard to the L1 Polish processes of final devoicing, glottalization of vowel-initial items, and consequent absence of liaison, Dziubalska-Kołaczyk, Balas, Schwartz, Rojczyk, and Wrembel (*Teaching to Suppress Polish Processes*) propose that formal pronunciation teaching

can be enhanced by harnessing aspects of imitation and 'repair' processes, supplemented by metalinguistic awareness. Through repetition activities, teachers can tap into the imitation process whereby a speaker converges on the phonetic properties of an interlocutor, particularly one they view favourably. The phenomenon of convergence operates especially on low frequency items (high frequency forms are more resistant to influence). L1-based repair processes that are transferred to an L2, such as Polish devoicing and glottalization in English, can in some cases be suppressed by tapping into competing L1 processes that in other contexts generate output consistent with the L2 target. Essentially, then, the proposal is for learners to start from what they already know and do in the L1 in order to progress towards new forms of pronunciation in the L2.

### ***Discussion and concluding remarks***

Clearly, *Teaching and Researching the Pronunciation of English – Studies in Honour of Włodzimierz Sobkowiak* contains studies of considerable interest to teachers and researchers in the field of L2 English pronunciation. The potential reader should certainly not be put off by the preponderance of studies using Polish ESL learners, since the issues addressed in the volume are pertinent to those interested in the teaching and learning of English pronunciation by learners having other L1s (and indeed targeting other L2s).

Nonetheless, the volume is not beyond reproach, particularly with regard to its rather narrow theoretical focus. Specifically, with the exception of Schwartz's study, the volume is geared toward a phonetic perspective on pronunciation issues, to the exclusion of a phonological and hence more cognitive perspective. Previous collections such as Ioup and Weinberger (1987), James and Leather (1987), Hansen Edwards and Zampini (2008), and Watkins, Rauber and Baptista (2009), have been stronger in this area. Indeed, Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011), another recent volume focusing primarily on Polish learners, includes phonologically based studies (covering for example the issue of final devoicing) which would appeal to researchers of a more abstract phonological bent.

As a result of the relatively narrow focus to the current volume, studies that address syllable structure and higher prosodic domains such as the foot are missing. This is unfortunate since the topic of lexical stress (necessarily associated with syllables and with foot structure) is addressed in some of the studies. Also absent are papers that adopt an optimality



theoretic framework to account for L2 pronunciation phenomena (i.e., the kind of analysis provided in Broselow, Chen & Wang, 1998, or Broselow, 2004).

Studies employing sociolinguistic methodology, collecting data from different levels of formality so as to investigate variation (e.g., Labov, 2001), are also notable for their absence. This is unfortunate given that interlanguage processes are typically non-categorical. Studies along the lines of Cardoso (2007), which investigates variation as well as employing an OT analysis, are thus not to be found here. Finally, the reader will find no papers that adopt psycholinguistic methods such as priming (Trofimovich & McDonough, 2011) to examine learner speech.

Admittedly, the volume may not have set out to be comprehensive in terms of the possible approaches to investigating L2 pronunciation issues, and the phonetic bias of the studies included may simply reflect the research interests of the dedicatee, Włodzimierz Sobkowiak. Nonetheless, the bias needs to be underlined so potential readers will know what to expect.

From another angle, an unfortunate limitation to the studies is that, while the findings have implications for the L2 classroom, the practical applications are generally not fully developed, leaving teachers to come up with their own solutions as to how to integrate the information into classroom practices. With the possible exception of the final study (*Teaching to Suppress Polish Processes*), the express teaching orientation to the volume is thus not pursued as far as it could be. Consequently, ESL teachers who are looking for specific recommendations and suggestions for actual classroom activities may be disappointed.

One further quibble concerns the inconsistent application of orthographic conventions, with individual authors apparently left to choose whether to employ British or American spelling. Likewise, a minor point that should have been dealt with at the editing stage is that, in the notes on contributors, the key term “second language acquisition” appears both with and without a hyphen. While these points may be nitpicking, such details unfortunately take away from the sense of a coherent volume. The collection would also be easier to consult if it contained an index.

These criticisms, both minor and more substantial, do not take away from the overall value of the studies the editors, Ewa Waniek-Klimczak and Mirosław Pawlak, have grouped together in this volume. The studies certainly attest to an impressively vibrant and active research community investigating both the practical and theoretical implications of ESL pronunciation issues in Poland and elsewhere. Certain emphases such



as research on frequently mispronounced words are not explored in the same depth elsewhere, and these perspectives have given me valuable food for thought. In brief, there is much here that can inform and inspire researchers and teachers of ESL around the globe.

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