Testing EFL pronunciation across Europe
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Abstract

As a workpackage of the EU Leonardo da Vinci VENOCES project (internet courses of vocational English in the fields of physics, ICT, interpersonal communication, environmental and civil engineering and architecture) a short 5-item multiple-choice questionnaire test of (declarative) knowledge of some phonetic processes of English has been conducted with 369 respondents, mostly students of universities and Fachhochschule in Poland, Germany, Finland and Lithuania. The study has confirmed that, globally speaking, spelling (i.e. graphophonemic inconsistencies), fast/casual speech processes and stress assignment are ample sources of error in EFL pronunciation. Some interesting L1-related variation has also been observed.

1. Introduction

VENOCES (*Vocational English Online Courses and Course Evaluation System*) Project started in October 2004 as part of the Leonardo da Vinci community action programme on vocational training, with a number of partners, both in Poland (Poznań, Gdańsk, Konin) and abroad (Great Britain, Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Estonia). According to the Project's summary statement: "the major product of this project will be vocational English mobile-technology-enhanced online courses in the area of Civil Engineering, Architecture, Environmental Protection, Modern Physics, Computer Technology and Interpersonal Communication. The dual-focus environment will enable the students to learn the vocational subject and language simultaneously, in the context of cross-cultural, pan-European cooperation".

One of the work packages of the Project was comprehensive needs analysis (Konin partner's responsibility) gauging both the 'wants' and 'lacks' of future beneficiaries of Venoces courses in terms of (a) general and vocational English, (b) computer literacy and (c) European attitudes (see Richterich & Chancerel 1980). The first component, i.e. general English lacks, was tested with an adapted *The European Language Certificate* (TELC) test at the Council of Europe's B1 threshold level, courtesy of WBT Weiterbildungs-Testsysteme GmbH, the sole provider of TELC in Europe. Part of the adaptation was the addition of a short declarative-knowledge-type pronunciation test, conceived of by the present author. It was thought that this would at least partly balance the heavy lexico-grammatical bias of the original TELC test and provide some interesting data on the phonetic proficiency of the respondents. This information would feed into the design of the pronunciation aspects of the Venoces courses. For technical reasons it was not possible to extend the test beyond the five questions actually asked.

2. The pronunciation test in Venoces needs analysis

2.1. Respondents and data

Three hundred and sixty-nine respondents altogether took filled in the needs-analysis questionnaire. Practically all of them were students in a variety of higher education institutions in the respective Project partner countries, majoring in the subjects of relevance to

the Project, but having advanced ESP courses as well. The questionnaire was run between mid-November and mid-January 2004/2005. The results were summed-up and entered in a custom-made Excel template by the personnel of the respective Project partners. Further result collation and analysis was done by the Konin partner on already aggregated data. While this procedure was, for a number of reasons, the only feasible one to ascertain timely results with limited labour, its downside was that no stringent statistical significance testing could be carried out on the observed mean differences and trends. For example, in the present context, it was not possible to measure correlations between phonetic proficiency (as captured by the five questions) and such variables as age, gender, year of study, general EFL needs, etc.

One variable which was easy to extract from the data was the native tongue of the respondents – this was by and large captured by the geographical source of the data. The three L1-wise largest groups of respondents were: Poles, Germans and Finns, in this order, with 132, 126 and 62 returned questionnaires, respectively. The make-up of these groups by school and major is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Venoces needs analysis questionnaire respondents (largest L1-groups)

School	Major	N
Poznań University of Technology	Civil Engineering	12
Poznań University of Technology	Environmental Technology	30
Poznań University of Technology	Architecture	30
Poznań University of Technology	Physics	11
Poznań University of Technology	Physics	14
PWSZ Konin	Economy	35
Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences	ICT	13
Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences	Physics	22
Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences	Environmental Technology	22
Lübeck University of Applied Sciences	Civil Engineering	23
Lübeck University of Applied Sciences	Environmental Technology + ICT	23
Lübeck University of Applied Sciences	ICT	12
Fachhohschule Lübeck	ICT	11
West Pirkanmaa District Adult Education Unit	ICT	43
West Pirkanmaa District Adult Education Unit	Interpersonal Communication	14
West Pirkanmaa District Adult Education Unit	Interpersonal Communication	5
	sum	**320**

2.2. Data presentation and discussion

The five phonetic questions with results for the three groups of respondents as well as averaged over the whole respondent sample are shown in Table 2. Percentage figures are directly comparable across the four columns. Thus, for example, as many as 45 % German students correctly identify the back nasal as the final sound of *young* in the first question, but only 24% Finns and 21 % Poles; the grand mean being 30.1%.

Table 2. Venoces needs analysis pronunciation test results

	all	German		Finnish		Polish	
Question	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
1. The word *young* ends in sound:							
a) /g/	47.2	49	38.9	40	64.5	66	50.0
b) /k/	8.1	3	2.4	1	1.6	23	17.4

c) /ŋ/ (back nasal)	30.1	57	45.2	15	24.2	27	20.5
[no answer]	14.6	17	13.5	6	9.7	16	12.1
2. The <s> in *as you are* in fast speech is:							
a) pronounced as /ʒ/ (the sound in the middle of *pleasure*)	12.7	14	11.1	8	12.9	20	15.2
b) pronounced as /s/	43.1	58	46.0	37	59.7	54	40.9
c) pronounced as /z/	28.5	36	28.6	13	21.0	37	28.0
[no answer]	15.7	18	14.3	4	6.5	21	15.9
3. *I have been* in natural spoken English sounds like:							
a) /aihævbin/	29.8	30	23.8	26	41.9	39	29.5
b) /aihæfbin/	24.7	32	25.4	14	22.6	35	26.5
c) /aivbin/	30.4	46	36.5	17	27.4	40	30.3
[no answer]	15.2	18	14.3	5	8.1	18	13.6
4. The stress in *February* comes on the:							
a) first syllable	50.7	49	38.9	33	53.2	79	59.8
b) second syllable	22.5	32	25.4	13	21.0	34	25.8
c) third syllable	10.3	21	16.7	6	9.7	7	5.3
[no answer]	16.5	24	19.0	10	16.1	12	9.1
5. The <r> in *more about it*:							
a) is dropped	38.8	42	33.3	27	43.5	51	38.6
b) is pronounced	41.7	58	46.0	25	40.3	60	45.5
c) is changed into /w/	2.4	2	1.6	1	1.6	6	4.5
[no answer]	17.1	24	19.0	9	14.5	15	11.4
average % correct	**33.1**		**35.5**		**31.6**		**34.3**

The interpretation of results can only be tentative because no strict experimental controls were imposed on the sample of respondents, for example in terms of their expected proficiency level in general English. Reading comprehension and "language elements" tests, derived from the TELC B1 battery (i.e. roughly upper intermediate) were run concurrently and yielded 68% and 57% correct answers, respectively, which means that our sample is just about at the TELC pass level. Finnish results are provided here for comparison, but no phonetic analysis is attempted, for which a much more thorough knowledge of the respective sound system would be necessary than is currently available to the present author. With these provisos, the results of the pronunciation mini-test can tell us quite a lot about the (declarative) phonetic knowledge of a cross-section of European students of ESP.

Notice first that the overall proportion of right answers in this test is exactly one-third (33.1%), i.e. noticeably lower than for the other, non-phonetic, tests. Germans and Poles did a little better than average, Finns a little worse (greater glotto-typological distance from English?). The only question with a clear majority of correct answers is the fourth one – about the stress in *February*. These results seem to confirm the notorious observation of teachers and researchers that pronunciation remains the Achilles' heel in EFL/ESL instruction. This observation is further strengthened by the relatively high proportion of "don't know" answers, which is stable across the five questions (including the apparently easiest one about *February*).

The results of the **first question** clearly show the mesmerizing power of spelling in EFL/ESL pronunciation, as well as (possibly) the well-known futility of taking recourse to phonetic metalanguage (*back nasal*) and/or transcription in pronunciation instruction and testing. However, the effect of L1 transfer also appears to be strong: Germans, with their phonemic /ŋ/, scored more than twice as high as Poles did.

Questions two and three concern fast/casual English speech, another well-known source of pronouncing difficulty. Only one in eight respondents overall was aware of the assimilatory

palatalization of /s/ before palatals, like in *as you*, a process practically automatic in natural English speech. The interpretation of the results for question three is less straightforward: the correct answer is only marginally more frequent than answer a), with b) close behind. Three sources of this distribution appear to have played a role: (1) respondents are not aware of the amount of phonetic reduction in natural spoken English, (2) the 'full' uncontracted spelling *I have been* may have suggested the 'full' pronunciation (for power of spelling see above), (3) phonetic transcription, even if rather easy in this case, may have confused some respondents. Notice that with these two questions the differences between German and Polish scores are slight, and both reflect very closely the mean results.

Even the seemingly easy **stress question** yielded as many as one-third incorrect answers overall (not counting "don't knows") – the result hard to completely explain on grounds of L1 transfer, for example, with neither of the cognate L1 equivalents (German, Finnish: '*helmikuu*) in this study stressing the <u>second</u> syllable of *February*. However, German does stress the last syllable of *Februar*, and it is tempting to ascribe the rather high error rate to this fact. Clearly, in this question, Poles are on top of Germans, both in terms of the proportion of correct answers (almost 60% – highest of all five Polish correct scores), but also in terms of almost unanimous rejection of option c) and a very low level of uncertainty (9% – again the boundary case for all [no answer]'s).

Finally, the **linking-r question** turned out to be rather hard, too, even if the correct answer got most hits overall (as well as from Germans and Poles). The belief that <r> is actually dropped in *more about* (which could only happen in rather emphatic speech in English) scored quite high: 1/3 German answers and even more Polish. Notice also that: (1) the suggestion that another juncture-closing device of English (/w/) could be used here was unanimously rejected (the highest level of certainty overall in the whole test), and, at the same time, (2) this question generated the highest proportion of "don't know" answers (at least for Germans and the whole sample).

3. Summary and conclusion

This study has confirmed that spelling (i.e. graphophonemic inconsistencies), fast/casual speech processes and stress assignment are ample sources of error in EFL pronunciation across Europe. Some possible effects of phonetic transfer from L1 have been discovered (both segmentally and suprasegmentally). The global scores of pronouncing proficiency remain below those for lexico-grammar in the same population of respondents. On average, 15.8% (i.e. one in six) respondents failed to tick any option across the five questions.

These results should be seriously taken into account in EFL instruction, both that based on the native speaker model and that relying on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) model of pronunciation of English as an International Language (EIL), in Europe and outside.

References

Richterich,R. & J.-L.Chancerel. 1980. *Identifying the needs of adults learning a foreign language*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.