THE PRONUNCIATION MISTAKES OF SLOVAK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present typical mistakes observed in the pronunciation of Slovak learners of English on the segmental and suprasegmental level. The pronunciation is viewed as a significant factor influencing comprehension in spoken communication. The mistakes result not only from the different inventories vowels and consonants, but also from the difference in use of the prosodic features in both languages.

Key words: *pronunciation, phonetics, phonology, pronunciation mistake and errors, phonetic inventory, phoneme, suprasegmental features*

1.1. MODELS OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

To pronounce the English correctly (in opposition to pronunciation with mistakes) is for the foreign learners of English one of the most challenging tasks. The obstacles on the way towards the correct pronunciation do not lie only in the learner's physical limitations of the articulatory organs maturing in the early teens, but also in the fact that the ultimate model of "correct" pronunciation in ELT has been established neither theoretically, nor practically. The role of the model is to guide the learners towards comprehensible pronunciation and successful communication.

Peter Roach (2009) presents the term BBC pronunciation, which he sees as the most appropriate term to describe the model of pronunciation easily available to listeners globally via the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC pronunciation represents the model of pronunciation which does not refer to any specific geographic area, yet it is the most comprehensible and accessible to the learners (and listeners) or English. Admitting that the pronunciation model he recommends is not even used by all speakers on the BBC itself, Peter Roach introduces this term alongside the term Received Pronunciation (RP), the well-established social accent used for decades, referring to the pronunciation of the highly educated. Some academic sources on pronunciation use the term General British (e. g. OALD 2000, p. 1426). These three terms are the central terms existing along the less frequently used terms, such as Estuary English, Public School Pronunciation, the Queen's English etc. They may be viewed as synonymic terms (Kelly 2001). All these terms refer to the most prominent social and geographical accents of the British English, since the position of pronunciation of the American English and other Englishes (e. g. Canadian, Australian, Irish etc.) in pronunciation training is a separate issue beyond the scope of this paper.

The inconsistence in the terminology is not purely theoretical, because its results can be found as the differences in the practical outcomes of the phoneticians' work – the dictionaries providing the recommended pronunciation of the words recorded by the phonetic transcription. The example of differences in the phonetic transcription could be the transcription of the word "perfect" (a.) that is transcribed as /ˈpɜː.fekt/ in the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (2011), while in both, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) and in the Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary (2011), as /ˈpɜːfɪkt/. The comparison of just three of the recommended pronunciations proves that the "correct" pronunciation may vary from one linguistic material to another. Therefore the issue of the pronunciation of English is a complex matter and the choice of the pronunciation model has to take into consideration several aspects.

1.2. THE ROLE OF PRONUNCIATION IN COMMUNICATION

The pronunciation courses or exercise materials set realistic goals in terms of achievement of good pronunciation – their aim is typically "to develop the learner's pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication with native speakers" (Roach 2009, p. 6). The pronunciation is usually practiced on the basis of the selected model (e. g. RP, BBC etc). In general, the aim of the pronunciation courses is to familiarize the learners with the set of phonemes of the studied language, to show the articulatory steps necessary for the production of the phonemes, and to show the distribution of the phonemes. The pronunciation of English words in particular significantly differs from the orthographic form of the word. Some pronunciation dictionaries (i. e. Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary 2011) and courses train the learners in the recognition of the target sounds on the basis of their systematic transcription by letters (e. g. the sequence of letters "ee" is typically read as / i:/, the sequence of letters "sh" is typically read as /ʃ/ etc).

If the learners of English are not completely familiar with the rules regarding orthography and pronunciation, the typical mistake could be reading the words containing the same target vowel sound differently in every word.

Examples:

a)	target sound:	**/æ/**	**bat**	**man**	**gas**
	students' pronunciation:		/bat/	/mæn/	/ges/
			/bat/	/mæn/	/gəs/
			/bæt/	/men/	/gʌs/
			/ba:t/	/men/	/-/
b)	target sound**:**	**/ʊ/**	**put**	**pull**	**push**
	students' pronunciation:		/pʌt/	/pu:l/	/pʊʃ/
c)	target sound:	**/3:/**	**bird**	**fern**	**purse**
	students' pronunciation:		/bIrd/	/f3n/:	/pʊrs/
			/ -/	/fern/	/pu:s/
			/b3:d/	/fern/	/pʊrs/
			/bed/	/f3:n/	/p u:rs/
d)	target sound:	**/ʌ/**	**strut**	**love**	**mud**
	students' pronunciation:		/strət/	/lɒv/	/mʌd/

The general approach towards pronunciation training is to show the learners the distinctive features of phonemes and suprasegmental features in words and utterances, and typically to train the learners by means of drilling the so-called minimal pairs – combination of words in which one sound is changed in them, changing also the meaning of words, irrespective of the orthography of the words (e. g. wheel – veal etc). The training allows the learners to familiarize with the system of sounds in English and their distribution, helping them to perceive the importance of pronunciation in communication and to achieve comprehensible pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al. 1996, Kelly 2001, Bérešová 2013). The allophones, i. e. sounds with do not change the meaning of words, are typically not central in pronunciation training.

The learner's pronunciation of foreign language is typically heavily influenced by the set of phonemes of their native language. The distinction in the pronunciation of Slovak and English will be discussed in the following section.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND SLOVAK PRONUNCIATION SYSTEMS

The following section concentrates on the identification of the English phonemes and suprasegmental features which are not present in the Slovak pronunciation, therefore lacking in the phonetic inventory of Slovak learners of English. Flege et al. (2003) point at the direct influence of pronunciation of the native language on the pronunciation of the second language. The identified unique sounds and pronunciation features will be supported by the examples taken from the spoken and written performances of the Slovak students of English (aged 19 – 25) recorded during pronunciation training sessions, conversation lessons and performing written tasks requiring the broad phonetic transcription of words after 12 week of training. The students were familiarized with the set of phonemes of the BBC English, their distribution and the phonetic symbols used for transcription.

One of the tasks was to identify one vowel phoneme occurring in all three words, which was written with orthographically different letters (see Examples from 1.2). Another type of task was based on the use of a transcribed word in a sentence, aiming to find out whether the participants recognize the stress patterns of words across word classes and whether they recognize the possible difference in the meaning of the words.

Their performances (oral and written) were recorded and compared against the Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary by Daniel Jones et al. (2011). The examples indicate that the pronunciation mistakes do not occur in isolation, but the mistakes tend to accumulate within the pronunciation of a single word, making the mistakes more likely to cause problems in communication.

2.1. SEGMENTAL LEVEL

The primary difference between English and Slovak vocalic inventories is number of phonemes – while the Slovak inventory has 42 phonemes, the English uses 44 phonemes. In the analysis of the phonemic inventories of two languages the difference in the number of phonemes is not the most significant factor (Roach 2009, p. 24), as it is the overall quality of phonemic inventory that may differ significantly.

Both languages contain the set of short vowels similar to the cardinal vowels – a set of vowel sounds found in the vocalic inventory of majority of European languages, i. e. /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. The phonetic analysis proves that they sound only approximately similar – a closer inspection of the diagrams of both vocalic inventories proves the slight difference in their quality (see Pavlík 2000).

The typical short vowel for English /ə/, which is the most frequently occurring sound in English replacing number of letters of alphabet in orthography, is not found in Slovak pronunciation under any circumstances. This causes the Slovak learners typically to replace the sound by full, non-reduced, form of the sound closest to the written letter.

Examples:	**model**	**students**
family	/ˈfæməli/	/fæmili/, /fʌmɪli/
pencil	/ˈpensəl/	/pensɪl/
method	/ˈmeθəd/	/məθɒd/
island	/ˈaɪlənd/	/ailend/
history	/ˈhɪstər.i/	/histori/
ahead	/əˈhed/	/æhəd/

volunteer	/ˌvɒlənˈtɪər/	/vɒluntiə/
stomach	/ˈstʌmək/	/stoumæk/

Another sound typical for English is the sound /æ/ which tends to be simplified either to /a/ or /e/, depending on the word and the speaker.

Examples:	**model**	**students**
wax	/wæks/	/wex/, /vex/
anger	/ˈæŋgər/	/ ə´nger/
angle	/ˈæŋgəl/	/əngl/
climatic	/klaɪˈmætɪk/	/klaimatik/
map	/mæp/	/ mep/

The distinction can be also found in the inventory of long vowels – sound /e:/, typical for Slovak, is not typical for English, even if a similar sound can be heard in pronunciation of the sequence of sounds /eə/, if they are followed by the letter "r" (e. g. pear). Similarly, the sound /3:/ cannot be found in the Slovak vocalic inventory (e. g. turn). The sound is used by the speakers of Slovak only in the spoken form, as a sound of hesitation. For comparison, see example C in 1.2 in this paper.

There are eight diphthongs in English and five in Slovak, none of them being the same. There is one diphthong in English which should be paid special attention by the Slovak learners of English – the diphthong /əu/, which can be mistaken and substituted by the sequence of sounds typical for Slovak /ou/, e. g. phone.

Examples:	**model**	**students**
owner	/ˈəʊnə/	/ɒuner/, /ɔ:nə/
show	/ʃəʊ/	/ʃɒu/, /ʃɒw/
broken	/ˈbrəʊkən/	/brɒukn/
ghost	/gəʊst/	/gɒst/

Other typical mistake of Slovak learners of English is the inappropriate and unsystematic pronunciation of diphthongs instead of single vowel sounds. The distribution of diphthongs is relatively organized, e. g. /ɪ/ is read in the word dinner, i. e. if the letter "i" is followed by doubled consonant; the word diner is read with /ai/, because the letter "i" is followed by single consonant etc.

Example:	**model**	**students**
purpose	/ˈpɜ:pəs/	/p3:poʊs/
danger	/ˈdeɪndʒə/	/dendʒə/, /dændʒə/
month	/mʌnθ/	/məʊntθ/
statement	/ˈsteɪtmənt/	/stejtment/
automatic	/ˌɔ:təˈmæt.ɪk/	/ʌʊtmatɪc/
ceiling	/ˈsi:lɪŋ/	/seilɪŋ /
stomach	/ˈstʌmək/	/stoumæk/

There are no triphthongs in Slovak, which are typical for non-rhotic accents of English. Since they end in the sound /ə/, which is not typical for Slovak pronunciation, it is usually replaced by the full sound, in this case phoneme /r/. This habit may be supported by the wide availability of spoken rhotic accents in media and on the Internet (e. g. General American).

The consonant inventories also vary greatly – both in their inventories and the distribution of phonemes.

The phonemes unique to English pronunciation are the dental consonants /ð/ and /θ/, often mistaken by the Slovak learners for various sounds, such as /t/, /f/ or /s/ and /z/, or they can substitute one another.

Example:	**model**	**student**
mouth	/maʊθ/	/maʊθ/
think	/θɪŋk/	/tɪnk/
teeth	/tiːθ/	/tiːf/
health	/helθ/	/hælf/
this	/ðɪs/	/dɪs/, /zɪs/
there	/ðeə/	/θeə /

Other unfamiliar distinctive consonants in English are /v/ and /w/, which in Slovak are in the allophonemic relation (i. e. they can substitute one another according to the previous or the following sound), while in English they are in the relation of phonemes (i. e. can differentiate the meaning).

Example:	**model**	**students**
world	/wɜːld/	/vɒld/
women	/ˈwɪmɪn/	/vɪmnɪ/
wound	/wuːnd/	/vuːnd/, /vəund/
wax	/wæks/	/vex/
wet	/wet/	/vet/

Similarly, there is phoneme /r/, which in Slovak is pronounced as alveolar tap, while in English approximant with different distribution across various accents across the different variety of English accents. While in the BBC English it tends to be pronounced only before vowel sounds, in other varieties, especially in the General American accent it can be pronounced also before consonants and before pause.

On the contrary, some of the typical Slovak pronunciation sounds, orthography of which in English corresponds with their Slovak orthography, can also cause mistakes of pronunciation. The example is the Slovak velar fricative /x/ written as sequence of letters “ch”. In English, the pronunciation of the letter sequence is varied – as /tʃ/ in “cheese”, or as /k/ in /krəˈnɒlədʒi/. Slovak learners typically read the letter sequence as /tʃ/, or their native /x/.

Example:	**model**	**students**
chemical	/ˈkemɪkəl/	/chemɪkəl/
stomach	/ˈstʌmək/	/stoumæk/, /ˈstʌməch/, /ˈstʌm.ətʃ/

Also, the sound /r/, among other sounds, can be used as a linking element in the connected speech between two words, first one of them ending in the /r/ and the second one beginning with a vowel (e. g. *Her eyes shine*.), or the intrusive /r/, which is found in the words with bordering sounds of which are the vowel sounds; e. g. *Africa is a continent*. This paper concentrates primarily on the words in isolation, therefore linking /r/ is not found in the analysed material.

Also, great variety of consonants is not pronounced in English (i. e. silent letters) in various accents, i. e. “n”, “l” or “b” , which also causes possible mistakes in pronunciation of English by Slovak learners (e. g. hymn, chalk, comb).

2.2. SUPRASEGMENTAL LEVEL

Suprasegmental features can be found on longer stretches of speech than one phoneme, the sounds influencing one another to the extent of changing the meaning of words or utterances. The features typically involve change of pitch (i. e. intonation) or relative prominence of sounds (i. e. stress).

While the intonation features of both languages is relatively similar (rising and falling tones, the various functions, Roach 2009), the stress (primarily the word stress) is a completely different and complex matter in English.

The typical function of intonation beneficial to Slovak students of English is the grammatical function, in which the intonation not only corresponds with the grammatical rules (e. g. falling intonation at the end of statements), but can also substitute the incorrect grammar, i. e. the rising intonation of the questions realized by the declarative sentences.

Example:

I saw that, you know what I mean↗?

The stress placement in Slovak is relatively fixed, almost never on any other syllable than the first in the word,

In English, the stress placement varies on several factors:

1. The quality of syllable – stressed syllable should not contain neither /ə/, nor or close vowels /i/ and /u/, nor syllabic consonant /m/, /n/, /l/
2. The word category – the nouns tend to be stressed towards the beginning of the word, the verbs and some adjectives towards the end
3. The morphological structure of the word – different if the word is morphologically simple, compound or complex
4. The number of syllables – only one primary stress can be in a word – if one of the syllables is influenced by the above mentioned rules, the other one carries the primary stress

Example:

model	**students**
un´pleasant	´unpleasant
a´head	´ahead
a´rrange	´arrange
cigar´ette	´cigarette
person´ality	´personality
laundr´ette	´laundrette
a´ssistant	´assistant

ma´terial	´material
uni´que	´unique
o´pinion	´opinion
´women	wo´men
´punish	pu´nish

The use of the stress placement is very important to know, since it can not only change the pronunciation of the words, but also it can change the meaning of the words significantly, especially in the so-called word class pairs, i. e. words that are written in the same way, but they belong to a different word class and have similar pronunciation, e. g.

desert (n.) /ˈdez.ət/ - dry area covered in sand with little to no rain

desert (v.) /dɪˈzɜːt/ - to run away, to leave behind

Some of the words from word class pair group can also have semantically related meaning (e. g. rebel (n.) – rebel (v.). The examples show, that incorrect pronunciation can completely disrupt the message sent to its recipient and that the training of correct stress placement should start to be drilled when familiarizing with individual words.

Example:

Semantically related word class pairs

word (word class)	transcription	the sentences of students
perfect (v.)	/pəˈfekt/	My wedding day must be perfect!
insult (n.)	/ˈɪn.sʌlt/	Do not insult the president.
protest (n.)	/ˈprəʊ.test/	The teachers will protest
import (v.)	/ɪmˈpɔːt/	Import and export are connected.
contrast (v.)	/kənˈtrɑːst/	Black colour is in contrast with black colour.
record (n.)	/ˈrek.ɔːd/	You have to record everything.
escort (v.)	/ɪˈskɔːt/	President has very strong escort.
conduct (n.)	/ˈkɒn.dʌkt/	I conduct an interview.

Semantically unrelated words:

word (word class)	**transcription**	**the intended meaning of the word**
the sentences of students	***the word class and the meaning of the word in the sentence***	
subject (v.)	/səbˈdʒekt/	to control
It was hard decision for the subject to do./ Let's change the subject. (n., a person/topic)		
dessert (n.)	/ˈdez.ət/	sweet food
I ate a chocolate desert		*(n., dry area covered by sand)*

desert (v.)	/dɪˈzɜːt/	to leave
The sand in the desert is very hot.		*(n., dry area covered by sand)*
object (v.)	/əbˈdʒekt/	to contradict
This object is very heavy.		*(n., inanimate thing)*
produce (n.)	/ˈprɒdʒ.uːs/	food made by farming
The sounds we produce while speaking are not always intentional. (v., to make)		

The provided examples show that the Slovak learners of English do not register the differences in the stress placement and the quality of the phonemes influenced by the suprasegmental features. The aforementioned examples of word class pairs also differ in the pronunciation (for comparison see Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary, 2011). Typically, the full vowel sounds are replaced by the /ə/ in unstressed position; in stressed position the full vowel sounds are full and long.

The examples provided in this paper are by no means complete; they represent the most typical pronunciation mistakes that can be observed in the pronunciation of Slovak learners of English, arising from the vocalic inventory and suprasegmental features typical for the native language of the learners.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The role of comprehensible and clear pronunciation in spoken communication is undoubtedly crucial. The knowledge of grammatical rules or lexical units is not sufficient, if the speech units are not recognized and decoded by the listener due to pronunciation mistakes. Under certain circumstances the use of suprasegmental features can be even beneficial for the speakers of English (e. g. emphasis on the most important word in the utterance, intonation substituting grammar in questions etc.).

The English as lingua franca serves as the ultimate communication tool of communication for learners speaking various native languages, therefore the cooperation is essential for information transfer.

The typical pronunciation features of Slovak learners of English stem in the pronunciation pattern adopted from their native language on both levels, on the level of phonemes and suprasegmental level. The lack of certain English phonemes in Slovak (i. e. /æ/, /ə/, /3:/, /əʊ/, /ð/, /θ/ etc.), the distinctive function of others, that are only allophones in Slovak (e. g. /v/ - /w/) or the lack of certain Slovak phonemes in English /e. g. the velar fricative /x/) and their distribution causes the majority of the pronunciation mistakes. As the provided examples show, the mistakes in production of certain phonemes tend to multiply even within a single word. The mistakes result in the substitution of one phoneme for another, the improper quality or quantity of the sound, or improper stress placement.

The pronunciation mistakes production can be avoided by consistent training, both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the learners should be familiar with the relations between orthography and pronunciation, practically by listening texts pronounced in the model pronunciation and the consequent practice and drilling, having in mind the clarity and comprehensibility.

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