



# Zkušenost studentů anglického jazyka s osvojováním výslovnosti

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# EFL Students' Experience with Learning Pronunciation

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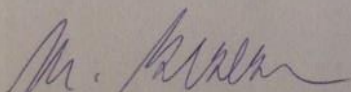
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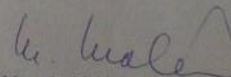
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## **Anotace**

Cílem této bakalářské práce je zmapovat zkušenost studentů, kteří studují anglický jazyk jako obor, s výukou anglické výslovnosti během jejich studia na základních a středních školách, a zároveň zjistit jejich názor ohledně důrazu, který by měl být na výslovnost během školních hodin kladen. K tomuto účelu byl vypracován anonymní dotazník, který v elektronické podobě vyplnilo 30 studentů Technické univerzity v Liberci. Autor se ve zkušenostech studentů zaměřuje především na pozici výslovnosti mezi ostatními jazykovými prvky a zároveň zkoumá, na jaké prvky byl o hodinách kladen největší a nejmenší důraz. Dále je analyzován význam pozice učitele při osvojování anglické výslovnosti a jsou vyčteny další zdroje, které přispěly k zdokonalení anglické výslovnosti studentů. Výzkum ukázal, že dotazovaní studenti uznávají důležitost výslovnosti v hodinách angličtiny, ovšem jejich vlastní zkušenosti s jejich názory nekorelují.

## **Klíčová slova**

Výslovnost, výuka výslovnosti, srozumitelnost, angličtina, studenti, učitel, dotazník

## **Abstract**

The subject matter of this thesis is to investigate and analyse the experience of EFL students with teaching / learning pronunciation from elementary to secondary school and at the same time investigate and analyse their opinion about the emphasis which should be given to pronunciation in school classes. To collect their opinions, the author created an anonymous questionnaire which was filled out by thirty EFL students of the Technical University in Liberec. Concerning the students' experience, the author mainly focuses on the position of pronunciation among other language skills and systems and also explores to which of them was given the most and the least attention in school classes. Next, the importance of the teacher in teaching / learning pronunciation and the importance of other sources which contributed to students' improvement of English pronunciation were analysed. The research shown, that the respondents acknowledge the importance of pronunciation in English classes but their own experiences do not correlate with their opinions.

## **Key words**

Pronunciation, teaching / learning pronunciation, intelligibility, English, learner, teacher, questionnaire



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## **I. Introduction**

English is one of the most widespread languages in the world and it has become part of our everyday lives. Thanks to the English language people are more connected, more united. One can thus imagine the rising need of learning the English language already from an early age.

But the English language is a complex system with its own structure and rules. One has to master every of its skills and systems when learning it. Pronunciation is one of the systems and it is also the main topic of this thesis.

The reason the author chose to pursue this topic is because he feels there is not enough emphasis put on teaching pronunciation of the English language in school classes. Even though with pronunciation comes intelligibility which is an essential part of the communication competence. One can have all the knowledge about the English language but what good is it when one cannot be understood.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the position of pronunciation among other skills and systems of the English language, those, being grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, history and culture, reading and writing. Furthermore, the aim is to investigate the importance of teaching pronunciation in school classes, the importance of the teacher and influence of Czech accent on learning English pronunciation.

Thirty EFL students at the Technical University of Liberec were asked via anonymous questionnaire to comment on their own experience of teaching / learning pronunciation of the English language. What they consider to be positive or negative, what kind of approach their teacher had and if they consider school classes to be their main source of learning pronunciation.

The thesis is divided into two parts – theoretical and practical. The theoretical part deals with the clarification of the general terminology. The practical part is focused on the analysis of the questionnaire and data presentation.

## **II. Theoretical Part**

### **A. The History and the Development of Teaching Pronunciation**

Seidlhofer states that “pronunciation stood at the very beginning of language teaching methodology as principled, theoretically-founded discipline” (2001, p. 56). She further describes the development of teaching pronunciation as follows.

Teaching pronunciation originated with the late-nineteenth-century *Reform Movement* which cooperated with the *International Phonetic Association* on the development of the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) which to this day is the universally agreed transcription system for the accurate representation of the sounds of any language. The association’s principles of teaching held spoken language as primary and considered phonetics to be of great importance for both the teacher and the learner.

Between the 1930s and the 1960s in both the United States and the United Kingdom, pronunciation was still considered superior to the other language skills and systems – grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing and also history and culture. The aim was to form ‘good pronunciation habits’ through drills and verbal exercises.

The situation changed in the 1960s when mainstream language teaching suppressed the importance of pronunciation which resulted in the shift of the aim of the English teaching from pronunciation and intelligibility to better knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Even though the priorities in the language teaching changed, there was an increase in the demand for ‘humanistic’ approaches. Their

legacy can be increasingly recognized in contemporary teaching: it is the belief that success is crucially dependent on the learners developing a sense of responsibility for their own learning (2001, p. 56-57).

The rise of communicative language teaching at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century has created a dilemma – the view that “intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence” (Morley, 1991, p. 488) is generally accepted as well as the need of teaching pronunciation on both segmental and suprasegmental levels. Features on the segmental level are considered to be consonants and vowels. Suprasegmentals are the features that together form an acoustic side of the sounds of a language – stress, intonation, linking, elision, liaison and rhythm. The communicative language teaching uses communicative activities based on the interaction as a learning tool instead of drills and exercises. If successful, learners’ attention should be towards the message they want to send and not the language itself.

Our time has seen a reconceptualization of the role of English in the world and so of the purposes of learning it (Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 57). As more and more people are learning English, the widening of approaches that would suit both native and non-native learners (with consideration to their accents) is necessary. This situation has caused an increase in the complexity of teaching pronunciation and the demands made on teachers’ knowledge with it.

## **B. The Importance of Pronunciation of the English Language**

Since it was established that pronunciation was considered a major feature in the past, a more contemporary look should now be analysed.

Pronunciation has a major role in both our personal and our social lives. As individuals we reflect our identity in the way we speak and also indicate our

membership of particular communities. Goodwin also considers pronunciation to be the language system that the most often identifies the speaker as non-native (2001, p. 117). Unfortunately, it can also be seen as a filter and a tool for discrimination – when engaging in verbal communication, our pronunciation abilities are the first thing that one notices. For example, witnessing otherwise proficient learners who have difficulties while speaking one can understand their frustration when being asked to “repeat”. It does not matter if a message is there waiting to be sent when one has no means of properly doing so. There is no reason why pronunciation should be given any less attention in comparison with other language skills and systems those being for example grammar and vocabulary. The way one speaks may also influence others opinions about one’s language competences and may affect one’s social connections and image.

Setter considers the study of a foreign language rather pointless if the main intent is not to communicate in it with other speakers and, to this end, one must learn how to pronounce it in a way which can be understood by a number of listeners (2008, p. 447). Vocabulary and grammar have no use when one cannot speak properly. English has arisen as the world lingua franca and being intelligible when speaking it should, therefore, receive a great deal of attention but pronunciation is unfortunately sometimes in the background in favour of reading and writing, which can be the most demanded features in schools for cultures which are heavily focused on them (Setter, 2008, p. 447).

Mispronouncing a word can have a fatal impact on its meaning or meaning of the whole grammatical structure. For example, if one says /bi:r/ instead of /beə/, the message would only confuse the hearer. Hişmanoğlu supports this fact by stating that not having a sufficient knowledge of the sound patterns causes impossibility to

neither encode the message to anybody nor decode the message sent (2006, p. 102). As the English spelling often does not correspond with the word's pronunciation, vocabulary learning should also include the correct use of the proper symbols of phonetic transcription. In some cases, the errors are obvious but thanks to context one can deduce the meaning of the mispronounced word. In other cases, the seriousness of the error is much higher and can even cause *communication breakdown*.

It should be obvious from the reasons stated above that pronunciation should be considered as equal to other language skills and systems in English classes as it enables to communicate intelligibly and to understand other speakers.

### **C. The Pronunciation Component in Teaching English**

Hişmanoğlu describes current trends in pronunciation pedagogy as having been affected by disciplines like psychology, neuro-linguistics, sociology, semiotics and computer technology (2006, p. 108). He further states that our time is adopting an interdisciplinary approach with taking personality factors (i.e. age, exposure to the target language, aptitude, attitude and motivation, influence of the native language and the type of prior pronunciation instruction) and psychological factors (anxiety, excitement...) into account. It stresses the importance of nonverbal aspects of communication and highlights the benefits of using the computer technology (2006, p. 108).

Some of those important factors will now be described more in depth.

#### **1. Age**

The age of a learner, with regard to phonetics, plays a role in teaching pronunciation as so called *critical period* describes that post pubertal learners have difficulties acquiring native-speaker pronunciation of the target language. Supporters



of this theory claim that children pick up sounds more easily than adults do. Regarding this fact, teachers should focus on teaching pronunciation from the very start of language teaching so learners avoid forming pronunciation mistakes by repetition as they otherwise inevitably do. Advanced students can improve all aspect of their proficiency in English but one – their pronunciation. The mistakes which were repeated for years cannot now be eradicated. The teachers sometimes claim that acquiring pronunciation should come naturally and do not include pronunciation in beginner classes at all, instead, more time should be allotted as courses progress. Baker states that “this process should in fact be reversed with considerably more time being allocated to teaching pronunciation at beginner than at later levels” (1989, p. 1). Including teaching pronunciation since the very start should lead to eradicating potential difficulties in the later stages of language teaching.

## **2. Exposure to the Target Language**

Meaning of the statement of Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin that more frequent contact with the target language results in higher success in language learning (2010, p. 18) is clear. This statement could be also paraphrased as “practise makes perfect” meaning that creating a habit of repetition stabilizes learners’ knowledge and leads to its further improvement. A study conducted by Trofimovich and Baker (2007, p. 257) focused on teaching Korean children suprasegmentals of the target language. A year of experience resulted in failure as none of the children gained knowledge of the suprasegmental features. On the other hand, eleven years of exposure to the target language to Korean adults ended with them producing all of the suprasegmentals with native-like accuracy.

When learning pronunciation one should first hear the language correctly than one should be able to produce sounds, words and sentences as well. Samantray

described this period of listening as follows “it allows the learner to internalize the phonology and the sound system of the target language [...]” (2005, p. 1), therefore, not including nor emphasizing this period enough could result in the learner’s future incapability to comprehend nor produce verbal communication of the target language. The interdependency between the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation is also stated by Gilbert: “If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language... If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from conversation with native speakers” (1984, p. 1). And as has already been stated, it is pointless to study a foreign language if one does not intend to communicate in it with other speakers of that language (chapter B., The Importance of Pronunciation of the English Language, p. 14-16). Similar thing is also mentioned by Nooteboom who says that “speech production is affected by speech perception, which makes the hearer an important factor in communication discourse” (1983, p. 183-194). This indicates the rising need to link pronunciation with verbal exercises to develop situations which would improve students’ pronunciation by listening and speaking. In addition, it is also beneficial for the learners to create an environment which includes native-speakers and books, music or movies containing the target language. Basically all sources accessible which could subconsciously improve learner’s pronunciation.

To make a learner aware of his / her own speech production the teacher should first increase the awareness of the oral motor mechanism and then show tongue placements for different speech sounds. To ensure proper feedback of learners’ progress the teacher should use various sound-recognizing exercises, those being for example cards with different sounds written on them and having learners show which sounds they heard.

### **3. Motivation**

Motivation is a strong tool, generally, when one decides to achieve something on one's own, the learning process should be faster and smoother when compared to a person who is being forced to learn by external factors, for example a teacher or a job. That applies to language learning / teaching as well.

We can distinguish between two kinds of motivation – extrinsic and intrinsic. The extrinsic is a kind of motivation where one is driven by external rewards – money, fame, grades... It is also very unstable, once the desired goal is achieved it disappears and there is no motivation for further learning. Crookes and Schmidt describe extrinsic motivation as instrumental and define the aim of studying a foreign language as more functional – having a better job or passing an examination (1991, p. 472). The intrinsic motivation comes from within us, it is long-term and deeper than the extrinsic motivation. The goal one sets may come with a difficult path but one should be still aiming higher, never to be satisfied. Crookes and Schmidt define intrinsic motivation as integrative and characterize those learners through the positive attitude and the potential for integrating into a language group or at least for meeting and interacting with the group (1991, p. 471-472).

#### **D. Setting Realistic Goals in Teaching Pronunciation**

Morley states the traditional pronunciation goals of “perfect pronunciation”, near-native-like pronunciation and mastery of pronunciation sound very attractive but are virtually unattainable for the vast majority of EFL learners (1991, p. 498). At worst, these goals can be devastating and can demotivate learners and frustrate teachers. But perfect or native-like pronunciation is not a necessary condition for intelligibility (Morley, 1991, p. 498). In fact, it is not even desirable. One possible native-speaker reaction is reported by Christophersen, it states that too-perfect

pronunciation may be that of “a host who sees an uninvited guest making free with his possessions” (1973, p. 199). Thus having a native-speaker-like pronunciation could be repulsive for actual native-like speakers as they would see it as if one considered oneself among them. Perfect pronunciation can be seen as betraying one’s mother-language community as retaining one’s accent features marks one’s identity. Also, by aiming for perfect pronunciation one loses those features that define one as non-native. Moreover, some could value intelligible non-native speaker with mother-tongue accent more than a native one since achieving that goal is not usual for non-native speakers and the accent could be seen as a remark of one’s effort and achievement.

The goals of teaching pronunciation were divided and outlined by Morley (1991, p. 500). These goals should serve as a realistic representation of learner’s capabilities.

### **1. Functional Intelligibility**

The goal set is to help the learners develop spoken English that is easy to understand and not distracting to listeners. Learners should be able to deliver the message verbally and with a clear meaning which should make the communication easier for both parties involved and should bring more acceptances into the conversation. Such goal could be achieved with detecting the most frequent pronunciation mistakes of learners and creating simple oral exercises addressing those mistakes in everyday-life situations. Two students could talk to each other, then the rest of the students would give them feedback and ultimately the teacher would evaluate the conversation and other students’ comments as well.

## **2. Functional Communicability**

The aim is to develop spoken English that would serve one's individual communicative needs appropriately and the result would be awakening of a feeling of communicative competence. One's needs can differ depending on the situation one wants to use the English language in. In schools, the English language is usually taught in a general way. Teachers focus on various features and conversations which occur in different places (work, school, restaurant, shop or a museum). The type of audience that one talks to should also be taken into consideration when describing this goal – a non-native speaker who has just started learning English should be spoken to in a slow, basic manner with patience and understanding of his / her lack of knowledge. Conducting exercises where one would have to portray a speech addressed to a beginner listener and then a native-speaker-like listener with obvious differences could help a learner perceive the distinction one has to make.

## **3. Increased Self-Confidence**

To become more comfortable and confident while speaking English, to develop a positive self-image as a competent speaker of the English language and to create feeling of empowerment in oral communication – that is the intended goal. With confidence (even if it may not be actually true) comes a feeling of dominance which eliminates anxiety and fear. Once confidence is achieved, the learner acquires the means to speak more openly and to experiment with new features. It also influences how the hearer perceives the message – our confidence can be registered by others which could make the message more acceptable and powerful. There are no exercises that would focus solely on the increase of confidence, instead, supported by use of an idiom “practise makes perfect”, self-confidence can be acquired with constant repetition of exercises and valuating quantity over quality.

Both the teacher and the learner's environment have a role to play as well since appreciation of learner's progress also increases the level of self-confidence.

#### **4. Speech Monitoring Abilities for Use beyond the Classroom**

Learners should develop speech awareness, personal monitoring skills and speech adjustment strategies which would help them continue developing intelligibility and confidence inside classroom as well as outside of it. Having a sense of self-criticism is nothing but healthy and being able to detect our own mistakes and flaws only benefits future progress in learning English. One best learns from one's own mistakes, by understanding and accepting this fact the learner should perceive mistakes as valuable learning tool and should not be afraid of pushing his boundaries of pronunciation competence. Adding a 5 minute recapitulation of learner's own verbal speech after an exercises should help him / her develop a sense of self-criticism and better ability to perceive mistakes of his / her own and of others as well.

#### **E. Current Perspectives on Teaching / Learning Pronunciation**

As more humanistic approaches arisen in later years, the significance of learner's comfort and environment for learning was noticed, since the learner is the one of the highest importance. The teacher should only serve as a "helm" to guide the learner. Hişmanoğlu defines this era accordingly - "Over the last twenty years a prominent shift has taken place within the field – greater emphasis has been put on the learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching" (2006, p. 104). When teaching English pronunciation, Setter defines the adapted models as "derived from what are sometimes referred to as older varieties of English" (2008, p. 447) those models namely being Received Pronunciation for British English and General

American for American English. Europe is commonly known for adapting British English as a model.

Castillo also emphasizes the need for the integration of pronunciation into oral communication, the change of emphasis from segmentals to suprasegmentals, more emphasis on individual learner needs, meaningful task-based practices, development of new teacher strategies for the teaching and introducing peer correction and group interaction within the field of teaching pronunciation (1991, p. 4).

“It is important to remember that people are different and that is why learners may prefer various learning styles that are the best for the intake and the comprehension of new information.” (Kelly, 2010, p. 116). The importance of the learner has been already stated and so that is essential for the learner to have optimal environment for processing new information. But as Kelly states not every learner has the same optimal “spot”, therefore, teachers must use different teaching styles to help find the learner his / her comfort zone for learning. The learning style is based on learners’ strengths, weaknesses and preferences.

The following is not an exhaustive list of teaching approaches, instead, just a brief overview of sources possible for teachers to investigate.

### **1. The Impact of Psychology**

Current trends in teaching pronunciation are being influenced by the discipline of psychology since according to Hişmanoğlu “pronunciation is very sensitive to emotional factors and that its nature is strongly related to students’ ego, identity and the level of self-confidence” (2006, p. 105). Creating an ideal state for learning is essential – this state includes mental alert, physical relaxation and emotional calmness. That along with a degree of confidence paves the way for

correct production of sounds. Efficient fashion of reducing stress levels can be found in drama techniques – through drama the students become more expressive and willing to experiment. Hişmanoğlu also quotes Wrembel who suggests a common strategy which involves assuming an English or American identity with a strong native-like accent (2006, p. 3).

## **2. Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP)**

Neurolinguistic Programming is another frequently advocated perspective which deals efficiently with the factors concerning learning pronunciation and facilitates an accurate production of the target language sounds. It is basically a collection of patterns and strategies focused on how the mind works and people's reactions. NLP states that desired mind state comes naturally when learning. It can be achieved by breathing exercises or an autogenic training – these should help learners to emotionally calm themselves and break down their ego boundaries.

Especially in pronunciation teaching, interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the learner is an important factor which leads to success. Here, Hişmanoğlu again quotes Wrembel who states that NLP contributes to use of a language more efficiently so that through sending positive messages and suggestions of success we can generate intended responses (2006, p. 3). This statement defines one of the teacher's responsibilities as having utter belief in student's capabilities and always to encourage him / her in further progress as these factors can benefit greatly to learner's improvement of pronunciation. NLP emphasizes the way learners are told to acquire pronunciation and the subconscious and conscious messages which include communication patterns.



### 3. Teaching Pronunciation from Different “Angles”

This section will address an alternative approach of teaching pronunciation. An approach that uses different senses of human brain as a mediator in acquiring pronunciation. These senses can be i.e. *auditory* (related to the sense of hearing), *visual* (related to the eyesight), *kinaesthetic* (related to the body movement) or *tactile* (related to the sense of touch) and using them have become very popular within the field of foreign language teaching.

Presenting a sound from several perspectives is considered to be a basic knowledge for good teaching pronunciation. A multi-modal approach should therefore be employed – that is that every sound process should be taught as a totality: *visual + auditory + tactile + kinaesthetic*. Engaging all senses at once should produce a strong bond. Learners should, therefore, hear and feel the distinction and feel the movement of the lips and the tongue.

Various pronunciation techniques for students with different intelligence type were presented by Thompson, Taylor and Gray. Learners with kinaesthetic intelligence are advised to use techniques like tossing a ball, using a rubber band, knee bending or body language. For learners with visual intelligence, techniques like using wall charts, mirror or card games can be used. Moreover, students with musical / rhythmic intelligence (that being kind of auditory sense) could utilize songs, kazoos or musical notation (2001, p. 16). Learners with visual or pure auditory intelligence are in advantage as these senses are the most commonly used in classrooms.

### 4. Autonomous Language Learning

A teacher who is using this approach motivates learners to become autonomous learners. While keeping in mind that student cannot ask their language

teacher for help in real life situation, this approach is trying to teach them to make their own decisions about learning pronunciation. To achieve this autonomy of a learner, the teacher should assign very broad-themed exercises and learners themselves should decide what the best manner for completing them is.

### **5. Reflective Teaching / Learning Pronunciation**

This approach has gained importance mainly in contemporary pronunciation classes even though according to Hişmanoğlu it is neglected by many teachers (2006, p. 107). The learning tool of this approach is the lesson itself as it can be video-taped or audio-taped and used for an evaluation by teacher's colleagues. They can provide feedback in terms of methodology and give helpful advice about better ways of presenting the same lesson. Learners can utilize the same method as well – by recording their speech and criticizing their own pronunciation or by comparing their performance with fellow learners. This method of self-monitoring can increase learners' level of self-criticism and thus further push their studies towards a larger progress.

### **6. The Use of Technology**

A growing number of learners and teachers show interest in a computer hardware which can be helpful in pronunciation pedagogy. Some specific programs focus primarily on sounds while others also provide information about the length, pitch and loudness of an utterance. The teacher has the option of uploading his / her own content or using one that is already covered. This provides possibility of adjusting the learning program to particular needs of a learner. Hişmanoğlu accepts computer technology as beneficial as he states that it provides learners with private, stress-free environment within which they can access unlimited input, practice at their own pace and receive instantaneous feedback (2006, p. 108).

Our days have also seen the rise of Internet which assumed a major position between the sources of study materials. It offers a wide range of resources for both the teacher and the learner. These include lesson plans, diagrams, articles, dictionaries or videos. Goodwin determined accessibility as one of the main stumbling blocks for learners progress (2001, p. 129). Nowadays, it is the Internet that serves as the easiest path to new information, although, the teacher should provide credible sources to learners as there are countless sites with unverified or made-up information.

#### **F. Teacher's Position in Teaching Pronunciation**

Just seeing and observing the target language is not enough, someone has to guide the learner through the rules and the features of the language, give him / her a sense of comprehension and connection and set the learner on the best possible path for knowledge. A teacher is the one to hold this responsibility as he / she presents the knowledge to learners and keeps them from going astray.

Many teachers will teach grammar or vocabulary but give little to no attention to pronunciation lessons. One possible reason is that teachers may be nervous about teaching pronunciation, that it is too difficult or perhaps other topics are of a bigger importance and teaching pronunciation simply makes things more complicated for the teacher and the learner alike. But learners will not acquire intelligible pronunciation just over the course of their studies, for them the teacher is the source of knowledge – learners need to be told of different sounds and their features. According to Morley “intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence” (1991, p. 488) which supports the importance and the purpose of pronunciation. Communication competence should be the main goal of learning a language. That should be the reason for teachers to not only include

pronunciation into their lesson plans but make it equally important to other topics as well. Hişmanoğlu claims that teachers should constantly revise the needs, goals and learning methodologies of a learner, they should monitor current approaches and be primarily concerned with the position of pronunciation within the communicative language teaching (2006, p. 104).

When teaching pronunciation, a meaningful communication should be emphasized to learners. The teacher must first choose to work on problems that significantly hinder students' communication ability and plan the lesson accordingly. An entire lesson can be devoted to teaching pronunciation, or just inserting short, separate bits of pronunciation into various lesson sequences could also be appropriate.

Regarding teaching pronunciation, Morley views the role of a teacher as one of assisting learners like a coach, a speech coach, a pronunciation coach (1991, p. 507). He considers not attending to student's pronunciation needs to be a violation of professional responsibility (1991, p. 136). The teacher's work can then be seen as similar to that done by other coaches. A coach gives advice, a direction, alters strategies, sets high standards and offers constructive feedback. A coach is learner's support and encouragement. The teacher-as-coach thus has diverse responsibilities towards the learner and these responsibilities are described as seen by Morley.

First, performing pronunciation analysis and guiding each learner to improve those features that will make the most noticeable impact toward increasing intelligibility. Second, helping learners set both long-range and short-term goals. Learning direction should be designed for an entire group of learners and for each individual learner in the group as well. Then, the teacher should create genuine speech task activities situated in real contexts and carefully chosen simulated

contexts for practice. Teacher's responsibility is also the encouragement of learners for out-of-class group assignments which would enable an encounter with real-world use of the target language and then having in-class discussion about the experience. Invited native and non-native speakers as guests should help provide speaking and listening activities for learners. Next, the teacher should guide each learner to modify elements in the speech pattern as part of the program and carefully observe speech production and performance of each learner. That along with encouragement should lead to speech self-awareness and realistic self-monitoring. The last and the most important is never-ending belief in learners' improvement in their efforts, no matter how successful they are (1991, p. 508).

Teacher's position in teaching, especially in teaching pronunciation is one of a great importance. Since pronunciation is a language feature which needs to be not only seen but, more importantly, heard and given proper feedback.

### **G. The Description of the English Sound System**

Skaličková describes that the distinction of each language lies in its specific sound material which is more or less distinct from those of other languages (1982, p. 9). This statement can be also applied when comparing the English and the Czech sound systems which are different in many aspects. First, the English sound system will be described so the most common sources of difficulties for Czech learners can be emphasized afterwards.

The first speech sounds of English are vowels which with the use of Roach's description can be identified as sounds "in which there is no obstruction of the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips" (2009, p. 10). The English vowel system can be categorized on the basis of various features out of which the distinction by length was chosen. We can distinguish between seven short vowels

and five long vowels. These vowels can be also described as *monophthongs* as they consist of only one sound.

The short vowels are:

/æ/ (*sad, bad, back*)

/ʌ/ (*cut, ugly, colour*)

/e/ (*bed, ten, egg*)

/ɪ/ (*fish, fifty, biscuit*)

/ɒ/ (*bottle, long, clock*)

/ʊ/ (*good, book, look*)

/ə/ (*bacon, better, father*)

The long vowels are:

/ɑː/ (*heart, tomato, aunt*)

/ɔː/ (*horse, ball, pork*)

/iː/ (*sheep, three, cheese*)

/uː/ (*boot, two, fruit*)

/ɜː/ (*Earth, girl, bird*)

In the English vocalic system there are also *diphthongs* and *triphthongs*. Diphthongs consist of two sounds and are more similar to long vowels rather than short ones.

The English sound system has eight diphthongs

/eə/ (*bear, fair, stair*)

/ɪə/ (*fear, deer, steer*)

/ʊə/ (*poor, sure, tourist*)

/eɪ/ (*date, name, major*)

/aɪ/ (*life, quite, behind*)

/ɔɪ/ (*oil, boy, toys*)

/aʊ/ (*mouth, house, down*)

/əʊ/ (*roll, boat, soul*)

*Triphthongs* consist of three vowels where the third one is always /ə/. Roach describes them in his publication *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course* as the most complex sounds of the English language.

English has five triphthongs

/eɪə/ (*player, betrayal*)

/aɪə/ (*fire, science*)

/ɔɪə/ (*royal, loyal*)

/aʊə/ (*power, hour*)

/əʊə/ (*lower, mower*)

The following speech sounds of English are consonants. Consonants differ from vowels as there is an obstruction to the flow of air as it passes from the larynx to the lips. There are twenty-four English consonants which can be divided into voiced and voiceless groups.

English voiced consonants:

/b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/, /dʒ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /r/, /w/, /l/, /j/

English voiceless consonants:

/p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, /θ/, /s/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /h/

It is important to mention that the English sound system is more complex than the Czech sound system, therefore, in it we can find such sounds that do not occur in the Czech sound system. Those sounds then understandably cause pronunciation difficulties for Czech learners as they never encountered such sounds before. English vowels that do not exist in the Czech sound system are /æ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/

and /ʌ/ and consonants present only in the English sound system are /w/, /θ/, /ð/. Regarding pronunciation teaching, Baker recommends to teach sounds which are common for both languages at beginner level as they are easier and learners can find comfort in being able to pronounce an English sound (1989, p. 1).

#### H. The Most Common Mistakes Made by Czech Learners

This chapter focuses on some pronunciation errors which are likely to be made by Czech learners and which can have severe impact on their intelligibility while communicating. These errors occur in those aspects or sounds which function differently in each sound system or are part of only one of those systems.

The first error Czech learners can make is caused by the distinction that is made between voiced and voiceless end sounds of an English word. In Czech, there is no distinction made between voiced and voiceless consonant at the end of a word as both are pronounced as voiceless. This can be seen in these examples: *les* /les/ x *lez* /les/, *let* /let/ x *led* /let/ (Skaličková, 1982, p. 148). But in English, this difference changes the meaning of a word, for example pronouncing a voiced consonant as voiceless in the word *dog* /dɒg/ – a common animal with four legs (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dog>) results in saying the word *dock* /dɒk/ – an area of water in a port that can be closed off and that is used for putting goods onto and taking them off ships or repairing ships (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dock>) or doing so in the word *but* /bʌt/ – conjunction used to introduce an added statement (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/but>) produces the word *bud* /bʌd/ – a small part of a plant that develops into a flower or leaf (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bud>). These examples are also



*minimal pairs* – these are pairs of words “that vary by only a single sound” (<https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/minimal-pairs.htm>).

When talking about the sound /s/ at the end of a word, it can be pronounced as /s/, /z/ or /ɪz/. Here, the *progressive assimilation* (when a preceding sound has an effect on a following one) is applied – when /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/ or /θ/ sounds precede the final /s/ sound, it is pronounced as /s/ (*hits, ships or bricks*). But when the final /s/ sound is preceded by /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /l/, /m/, /ŋ/ or /ð/ sounds, it is pronounced as /z/ sound. This can be seen with words *lids, grabs or hills*. The last situation occurs when the final /s/ sound is preceded by /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/ or /dʒ/ sounds, than the final /s/ sound is pronounced as /ɪz/, which can be demonstrated with words *pages, wishes or chooses* (<http://www.vivquarry.com/wkshts/pron.html>). This influence of the Czech sound system on learner’s pronunciation of the English language causes pronunciation errors and can even lead to *communication breakdown*.

The next error which Czech learners are prone to make can be caused by *minimal pairs*, some of them were previously mentioned. Interchanging such words can lead to *communication breakdown*. The most problematic minimal pairs for Czech learners contain sounds which do not occur in the Czech language, therefore, their recognition and pronunciation can be unknown to them and can be instead recognized and pronounced as Czech sounds.

The first problematic *minimal pair* is /v/ and /w/ since according to Skaličková the Czech language does not distinguish between the pronunciations of those sounds, as can be seen in words *vlak* /vlak/ and *western* /vestern/. This cannot be said when comparing /v/ and /w/ sounds in the English sound system – their pronunciation differs and so makes difference in the meaning of words. For example *vine* /vam/ – the climbing plant that produces grapes as is fruit

(<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wine>) x *wine* /waɪn/ – an alcoholic drink that is usually made from grapes (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wine>) or *veal* /vi:l/ – meat from a very young cow (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/veal>) x *wheel* /wi:l/ – a circular object connected at the centre to a bar (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wheel>). The fact pronunciation of /v/ and /w/ is different in English but the same in Czech causes mispronunciation of the English /w/ sound by Czech learners (1982, p. 189).

The next problematic *minimal pairs* are /θ/ and /s/ and /θ/ and /f/. The sound /θ/ is pronounced when letters “th” occur. The absence of this sound in the Czech language system creates difficulties as the learners may not know how to produce such sound nor even recognize it. That is why these sounds can be mispronounced as sounds whose pronunciation is similar to the Czech pronunciation – in this case as /s/ or /f/ sounds. Then, for example the word *think* /θɪŋk/ – to believe something or have an opinion or idea (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/think>) can be mispronounced as /sɪŋk/ – to go down below the surface or to the bottom of a liquid or soft substance (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sink>), /fɪŋk/ – someone who tells secret and damaging information about someone else (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fink>) or sometimes /tɪŋk/ (Skaličková, 1982, p. 188).

Concerning the /ð/ sound, its *minimal pair* is /z/. Again, the /ð/ sound is pronounced when letters “th” occur and also is not a part of the Czech sound system. Skaličková states Czech learners may moreover exchange it for /d/ or /dz/ sounds which Czech learners are more familiar with (1982, p. 188). Then the word *they* /ðeɪ/ – used as the subject of a verb to refer to people, animals, or thing already mentioned

(<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/they>) can be mispronounced as /dzeɪ/ or /deɪ/ – a period of 24 hours (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/day>) or the word *scythe* /saɪð/ – a tool with a long, sharp, curved blade (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/scythe>) can be pronounced as /saɪz/ – how large or small something or someone is (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/size>) or /saɪd/ – a flat outer surface of an object (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/side>).

Czech learners may also exchange /æ/ sound which again is not a part of the Czech sound system for /e/ sound (Skaličková, 1982, p. 86). Then the example words *man* /mæn/ – an adult male human being (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/man>), *bad* /bæd/ – unpleasant and causing difficulties or harm (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bad>) or *had* /hæd/ – past simple and past participle of *have* (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/had>) may be pronounced as *men* /men/ – plural of *men* noun (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/men>), *bed* /bed/ – a large, rectangular piece of furniture, often with four legs, used for sleeping on (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bed>) and *head* /hed/ – the part of a body, a person or animal when considered as a unit or a measure of length (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/head>).

Generally, it is very difficult to compare the English and the Czech sound systems from the side of their vocalic quantity since the relations of English and Czech vowels are hardly comparable (Menhard, 1982, p. 93). The Czech sound system has two degrees of vocalic quantity – “long” and “short”, whereas the English system has three degrees – “short” (*bit*), “medium long” (*bid*) and “long”

(*bead*). The term quantity represents the length of a vowel which in English is considered not absolute but relative (Gregová, 2008, p. 22). As Skaličková demonstrates with examples of words *bit* and *bid* which Czech learners can pronounce with an equal length. But in English, the kind of a consonant is determined by the length of a preceding vowel (1982, p. 185). It is, therefore, important to distinguish the length of vowels as the length of a vowel can change the meaning of a sentence. Such situation can be seen in sentences *I always sent /sent/ the letters* x *I always send /send/ the letters* (Skaličková, 1982, p. 185).

There are also other problematic sounds but their mispronunciation does not have such impact as to cause *communication breakdown*. One of the more commonly mispronounced sounds is /r/ which Czech learners may pronounce in words which contain the letter “r” but its presence does not lead to its pronunciation. This can be confusing to Czech learners and words *far /fa:/* and *barking /ba:kiŋ/* may then be pronounced with /r/ sound as /fa:r/ and /ba:rkiŋ/.

## **I. The Analysis of Pronunciation Exercises in Textbooks Used in Czech Schools**

Since the most common pronunciation mistakes a Czech learner can make when speaking English were established, the frequency and the quality of pronunciation exercises covered in textbooks which are used in Czech schools will now be examined. The textbooks chosen for this purpose are *Project 1-2*, First Edition which belong to one of the most commonly used textbooks in Czech schools.

Each Project textbook which was analysed covered pronunciation exercises in each of its units. These pronunciation exercises were in the form of the so called “Pronunciation corner”. Regarding types of exercises, they are generally the same as they focus on sound recognition and imitation at first and then gradually change to

sound discrimination and production. Imitation exercises ask learners to *Repeat a sound* after listening to it first, whereas production exercises ask only to *Produce a sound* without hearing it before. Sound recognition exercises were usually in a form of *Do you hear ... sound?* and sound discrimination exercises asked to *Circle the words with a different sound*. The pronunciation exercises covered both segmental and suprasegmental practice with segmental type being overall more dominant. Each textbook focused mainly on the practice of one suprasegmental feature as can be seen in Project 1 which focused on intonation and in Project 2 which focused on word stress.

But pronunciation is not the only thing that learners have to master over the course of their studies as the textbooks also cover reading, writing, speaking and listening skills along with vocabulary and grammar. Overall, the emphasis that is given to pronunciation exercises in Project textbooks can be considered sufficient. The exercises are arranged as to build upon earlier work – a certain topic is dealt with several times over and it gradually becomes more and more complex. An example of this fact can be demonstrated with a single sound where the exercises would be arranged as follows: *Listen and repeat. Say the sentence. Listen and repeat and find ... sound. Do you hear ... sound? Which word has a different vowel sound?* and finally *Say the tongue twister fast!*

The fact that *Project* textbooks are designed to be used internationally means that exercises are not composed solely for Czech learners. That makes some of the pronunciation exercises less significant as they focus on a sound or a feature which Czech learners are familiar with so they do not have to practice it as much. The textbooks present vowels and consonants by contrast (/əʊ/ x /u:/, /tʃ/ x /dʒ/, /ɪ/ x /i:/), however, the set of *Project* textbooks little cover *minimal pairs* practice and,

therefore, the importance of the distinction between the pronunciations of those sounds may remain unknown to learners. This mispronunciation can even lead to *communication breakdown*. When analysing the textbooks, the strategies of teaching pronunciation were obviously followed as the exercises progress from hearing a sound and imitating it to recognizing a sound and then producing it.

### **III. Practical Part**

#### **A. Introduction**

In the practical part the goals of the thesis are introduced. First, the questionnaire given to thirty EFL students at the Technical University of Liberec will be presented and its structure explained. The reason for giving the questionnaire to the university learners is to have an objective opinion of learners with deeper understanding of the teaching / learning process and the English language itself. Combining their own experience of past studies with the perspective they acquired thanks to university courses should provide an insightful and relevant view of the way the English language is taught at Czech schools. The questionnaire was distributed via Internet. The collected materials of the research are presented and subsequently analysed and evaluated.

#### **B. The Structure of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is comprised of twenty questions which focus on different factors that influence learning pronunciation. It was distributed to thirty-six EFL students out of which thirty completed it, which sets the response rate at high 83%. The author believes that such a high response rate could be explained by personal relations he established with most of the respondents during his own studies.

The first six questions of the questionnaire give attention to respondents' educational background – at what levels of education they studied the English

language and what kind of secondary school they attended. Moreover, the questions focus on the acquisition of second foreign language, whether it had influence on respondents' pronunciation of the English language and the questions also investigate the difference in difficulty of both languages' pronunciations.

The remaining questions in the questionnaire deal with English skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), systems (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar) and also history and culture as the respondents are asked to evaluate their importance in English teaching / learning. Following questions continue with asking the respondents to choose those skills / systems that were the most frequently taught and those that were the most neglected during their studies. After the evaluation of the importance and the position of English skills / systems in English classes, the questionnaire focuses on the pronunciation system of the English language itself. The aim is to investigate how much emphasis was given to pronunciation teaching in classes, if the correct symbols of phonetic transcription were used, how the respondents acquired better pronunciation, if the Czech language influenced respondents' English pronunciation and, furthermore, teacher's influence on the acquisition of pronunciation of the English language. The last question asks the respondents to state their opinion about the necessity of pronunciation teaching in English classes.

## **C. Analysis of the Questionnaire Given to EFL Students**

### **1. Students' Educational Background**

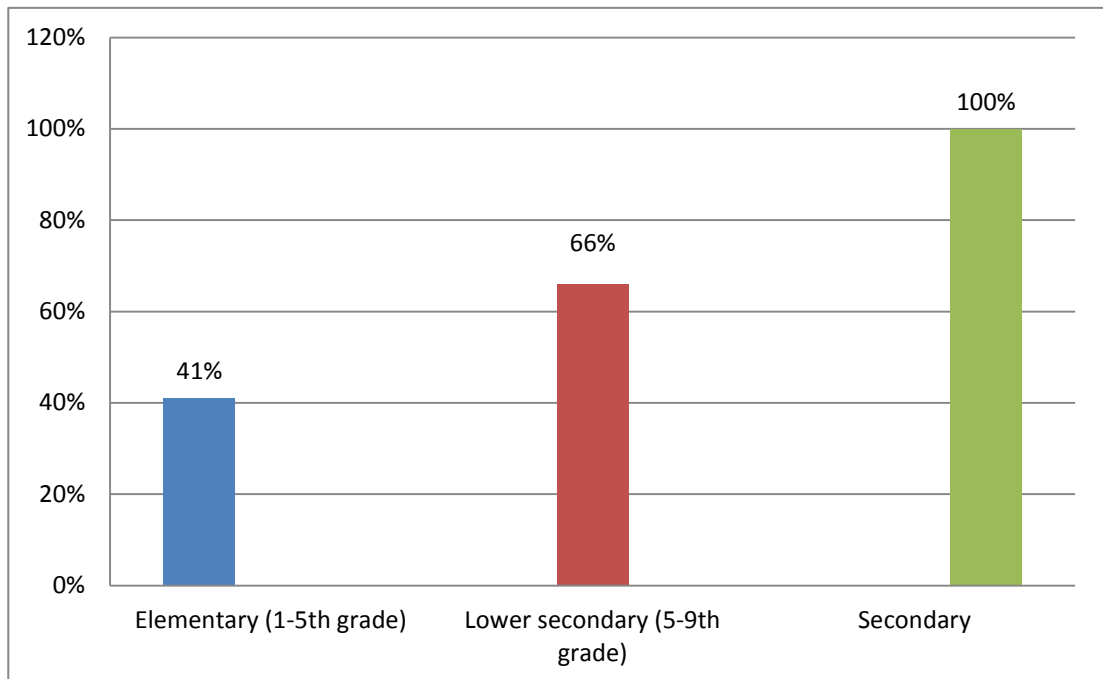
As was stated above, the beginning of the questionnaire investigates at what levels of education the students' studied English. Such information also indicates the level of their experience with the English language and further helps with analysing other questions in the questionnaire.

### a) Question Number 1

*“At what level(s) of education did you study English?”*

In the first question the author investigates respondents' overall experience with the English language. Out of thirty respondents, twelve of them (41%) started studying the English language already at elementary school – this group of respondents, therefore, have the longest experience with the English language. Eight (26%) respondents started their English studies at lower secondary school and overall twenty respondents (66%) studied English at this level of education. Ten respondents (33%) began to study English at secondary school and all respondents (100%) studied English at this level of education. Complete data which present at what levels of education the respondents studied English are shown below (see Figure 1). Analysing this data gave the author an insight about past emphasis of the Czech education system on teaching English as the levels of education at which the respondents started studying English are equally divided with elementary school being the most dominant (41%). Nowadays, the English language has even stronger position in Czech schools already from an elementary education level as it is obligatory for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to choose between studying either the German or the English language (Vančurová, 2010, p. 1).





**Figure 1** (Graph of the education levels at which the respondents studied the English language)

### b) Question Number 2

*“At what kind of secondary school did you study?”*

The next question continues with the investigation of respondents’ educational background and focuses on what kind of secondary school they studied at. Twenty-four out of thirty respondents (80%) studied at grammar school, making them a majority group in the conducted research. The rest of the respondents studied at business schools (10%) or hotel schools (7%) and one respondent studied at “pedagogics lyceum”. As majority of EFL students came from grammar schools, it could be said that grammar schools best prepare learners for further study of the language since the aim of business and hotel schools in teaching English is to give a proper qualification for work in the field, not the language itself.

### c) Question Number 3

*“Did you also study another foreign language?”*

In this question the author first investigates whether the respondents studied more than one foreign language. Out of thirty respondents, twenty-six of them (90%)

stated they in fact had studied several foreign languages. Studying two or more foreign languages at once was not uncommon in the past but due to different political system at that time the study of the Russian language was obligatory for every student up to 1989. Nowadays, the European Union also encourages its every citizen to know apart from his / her mother tongue at least two foreign languages (Györffi, 2016, p. 1) but more common selection of foreign languages is between English and German which are the two most dominant languages in the Union.

#### **d) Question Number 4**

*“Which other foreign language did you study?”*

The following data further investigates only those respondents who studied at least two foreign languages as it compares their perception of the difficulty of both languages’ pronunciations. The data collected from this question allows the author to create the list of the most studied foreign languages in addition to the English language.

Twenty-two out of twenty-six respondents studied German	(85%)
Six out of twenty-six respondents studied Spanish	(23%)
Four out of twenty-six respondents studied French	(16%)
Two out of twenty-six respondents studied Russian	(8%)

This list does not distinguish students who studied more than two foreign languages and only shows the frequency at which each language was studied. Out of thirty respondents three (12%) stated they had studied three foreign languages simultaneously and one (4%) even claimed he / she had studied four foreign languages at the same time.

This data only further supports the author's suggestion that the selection of foreign languages at Czech schools is influenced by the European Union as the most frequent foreign languages taught at Czech schools are English and German.

**e) Question Number 5**

*“In your opinion, which pronunciation was easier to learn?”*

This question compares the difficulty of both foreign languages' pronunciations. Spanish and Russian were considered by the respondents to have easier pronunciation but French and English were supposedly equally difficult when comparing their pronunciations. The opinion about the difficulty of German and English pronunciations was divided as well – nine (41%) respondents claimed German pronunciation was easier, eleven (50%) stated it was not and two (9%) respondents rated both languages to have an equally difficult pronunciations. The author's aim with this question was to compare the difficulty of the English pronunciation to that of other foreign languages' taught in Czech schools. The results show that the respondents consider English pronunciation to be either harder or equally difficult but not easier than any of the foreign languages they studied.

**f) Question Number 6**

*“Did studying another foreign language influence your pronunciation of the English language?”*

Question number six investigates whether the study of another foreign language influenced the respondents' pronunciation of the English language itself. Fifteen out of twenty-two (68%) respondents who studied German claimed that it had not influenced their English pronunciation, three (13%) claimed it had had and four (17%) respondents did not know. Other languages – French, Russian and Spanish also did not influence respondents' English pronunciation skills. It may thus

be that the influence of other foreign languages on English pronunciation is insignificant and the study of several foreign languages simultaneously seems not to cause interference.

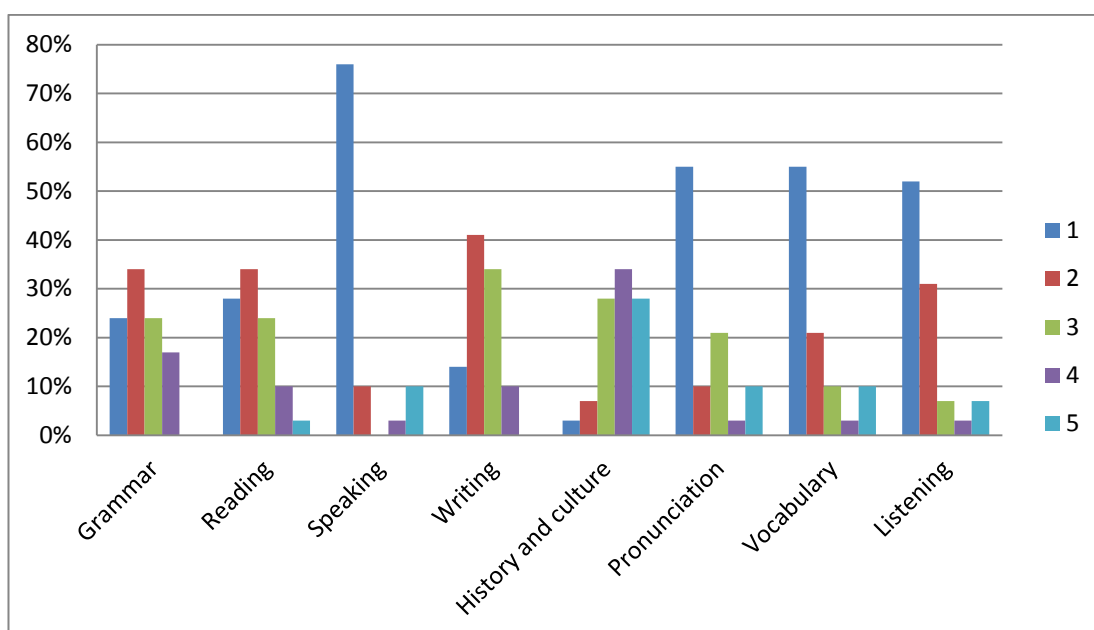
## 2. School experience

As the educational background of the respondents was presented and analysed the following section focuses on the pronunciation system of English itself.

### a) Question number 7

*“On the scale from 1 to 5 grade the following skills and systems of English and also history and culture according to their importance (1 being the most important)”*

The initial question of this section asked the respondents about their perception of the importance of each system and skill and also history and culture. The respondents thus evaluated grammar, reading, speaking, writing, history and culture, pronunciation, vocabulary and listening. The data collected from this question can be seen below (see Figure 2).

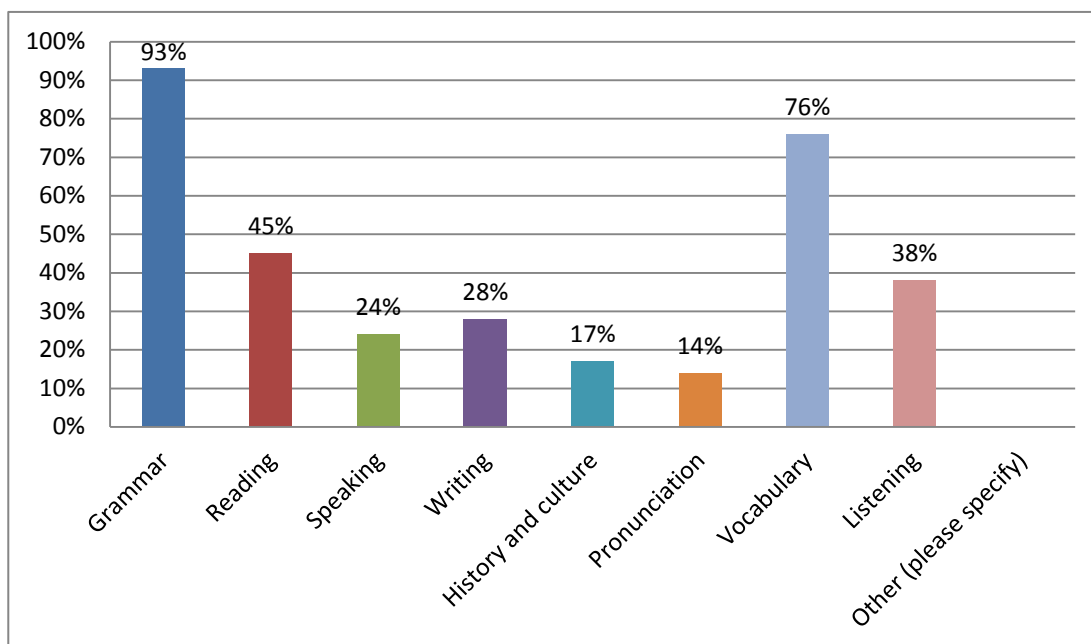


**Figure 2** (Respondents’ view of the importance of English skills and systems and history and culture)

From Figure 2, it can be seen that the respondents rated speaking as the most important skill (76%) of English. In terms of the systems, the most important were considered pronunciation (55%) and vocabulary (55%). Therefore, the respondents seemed to perceive the ability to communicate as the most important in studying a foreign language as speaking, pronunciation and vocabulary are very essential if we want to communicate successfully. The author links respondents' perception with Setter's statement that if the main intent of studying a foreign language is not to communicate in it than the study itself is considered rather pointless (2008, p. 447). Morley also states that an essential component of communicative competence is intelligible pronunciation (1991, p. 488) which further links the skills of speaking and listening and the system of pronunciation together. After all, without correct pronunciation one cannot be understood and when listening one also has to know what sounds one hears to deduce the meaning of the message sent. The least important as seen by the respondents was history and culture, the least important skill was considered writing and the least important system as rated by the respondents was grammar.

**b) Question Number 8**

*“Which of the following were most frequently taught at school?”*

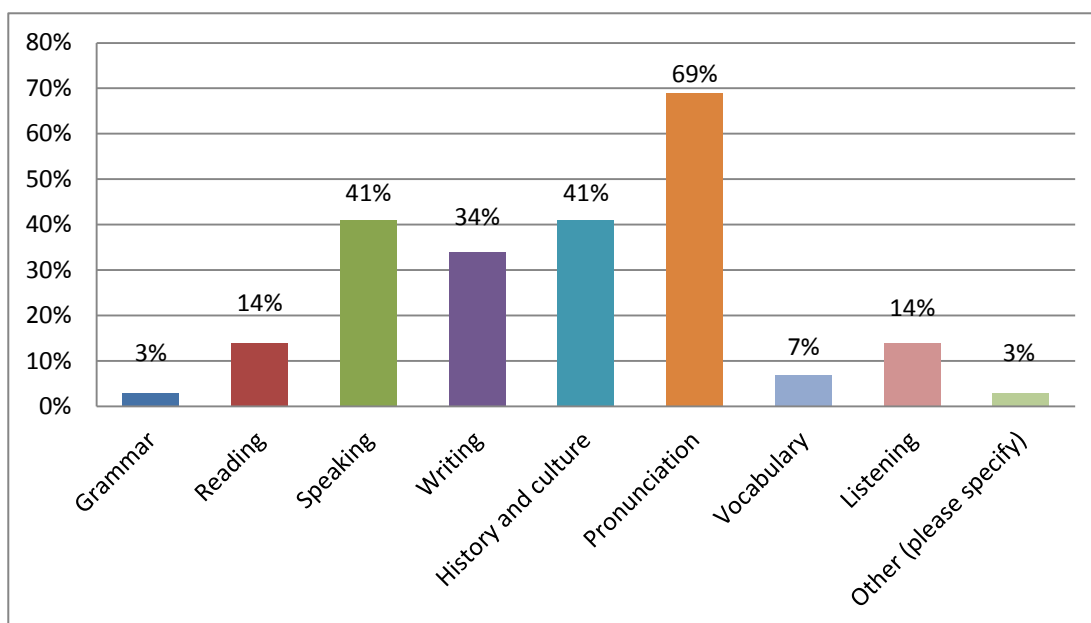


**Figure 3** (History and culture and skills and systems of English on which the most emphasis was put in the respondents' classes)

This question directly follows the aim of the previous question as it investigates the frequency at which skills and systems of English and also history and culture were taught in respondents' classes. The data presented in Figure 3 showed that the respondents feel the most attention had been given to grammar (93%) and vocabulary (76%). The data contradict respondents' answers to the previous question as they showed that what they considered the least important had been taught the most frequently. It could be said that grammar and vocabulary are the most demanded by the Czech educational system but students do not share this opinion. This may discourage them from further pursuit of the language study.

### c) Question Number 9

*“Which of the following were the most neglected at school?”*



**Figure 4** (History and culture and skills and systems of English which were the most neglected in the respondents' classes)

This question continues with asking the respondents to select such skills or systems and also history and culture which were the most neglected in classes. As is presented in Figure 4, the respondents saw pronunciation as the most neglected system (69%), speaking (41%) as the most neglected skill and history and culture (41%) was also considered among the most neglected. This data may correspond with the respondents' answers to question number seven where they marked speaking and pronunciation as the most important skill and system. The respondents' opinions should correlate with the aims of the educational system they are part of but previous data disproves this fact. The reason could be that the system itself is outdated and the respondents sense the shift in goals of foreign language teaching from perfect knowledge of its system to intelligible communication.

#### **d) Question Number 10**

*"How often was pronunciation practised in your classes?"*

The respondents' answers to this question even further highlight the negligence of pronunciation teaching as twenty-three (76%) respondents claimed that

pronunciation had rarely been given attention in their classes and only seven (24%) stated pronunciation had been given attention in every class.

The previous questions dealt with the importance and the frequency of teaching pronunciation and the results could again raise the question in paragraph F., *Teacher's Position in Teaching Pronunciation* (p. 27-29) – that is whether teachers are afraid of teaching pronunciation, feel incompetent to do so or are not able to include teaching pronunciation into lesson plans. But as was discovered in chapter I., *The Analysis of Pronunciation Exercises in Textbooks Used in Czech Schools* (p. 36-38) exercises dealing with pronunciation do occur in textbooks which are used in Czech schools in every unit. Therefore, the inability to include teaching pronunciation into lesson plans should not be taken into consideration when finding answer to this question as the textbooks already contain pronunciation exercises in satisfactory form.

#### e) **Question Number 11**

*“What symbols of phonetic transcription did you use in school? (Transcribe the word Chat)”*

Since the English sound system has several vowels and consonants which do not occur in the Czech sound system, it is important for the learners to know which symbols of phonetic transcription represent them. Their pronunciation can be unknown to them and they can confuse it with the Czech pronunciation of a letter it is represented by. To give an example – in the word *Chat* the letter “a” is pronounced as /æ/ (æ is the correct symbol of phonetic transcription for this sound) which is a vowel unknown to the Czech sound system. In English there can be many ways of pronouncing one letter as can be seen in letter “a” – /æ/ (*bad*), /ɑ:/ (*car*), /eɪ/ (*blame*), /ɔ:/ (*ball*), /ə/ (*a cup*), /ɒ/ (*want*), /ɪ/ (*image*) or it can even be silent (*typically*).



Therefore, it is important to learn how to use the symbols of phonetic transcription as the written form of a word does not reveal its proper pronunciation. The data showed that nine (30%) out of thirty respondents had not used the symbols of phonetic transcription at all in their classes and one respondent specifically emphasized that the teacher had showed only verbally how to pronounce different sounds. Ten (33%) respondents claimed they had used the Czech symbols of phonetic transcription. *Chat* was thus phonetically transcribed as /čɛt/. Another ten respondents (33%) stated they had used the English symbols of phonetic transcription (*Chat* /tʃæt/) out of which nine studied at grammar school. This fact may further confirm author's opinion that grammar schools teach the English language the most thoroughly.

**f) Question Number 12**

*“Did you do exercises whose focus was solely on pronunciation?”*

This question investigates whether the respondents did pure pronunciation-focused exercises in their classes. None of the respondents claimed they had done such exercises and seventeen (59%) stated they had done so only occasionally. The rest, twelve respondents (41%) stated they had never done pure pronunciation exercises. Including pronunciation-focused exercises into the lesson plan should help stress the importance of the pronunciation system and help the learners realize its significance for intelligibility. Possible forms of pronunciation exercises were mentioned in chapter D., *Setting Realistic Goals in Teaching Pronunciation* (p. 19-22) where they serve as tool for achieving pronunciation goals set by Morley.

**g) Question Number 13**

*“Were those exercises part of your textbooks?”*

This question follows the previous one and further extends it. Out of thirty respondents ten (33%) stated that the pronunciation exercises had been part of their

textbooks, eight (27%) stated that had not been and twelve (40%) respondents had done some exercises that had been part of their textbooks and some that had not been. The data could suggest that the pronunciation exercises in the textbooks may sometimes not be as appropriate for Czech learners since the textbooks used in Czech schools are international and do not emphasize problematic areas typical for only Czech learners.

#### **h) Question Number 14**

*“Did your teacher make pronunciation mistakes?”*

In the next question the author asks the respondents if they can retrospectively think about their teacher with reference to whether he / she made any pronunciation mistakes in classes. Eighteen out of thirty (62%) respondents believed their teacher had made mistakes and only two (10%) stated their teacher had not made any significant mistakes. The rest of the respondents (28%) did not know or were not able to tell. Since teacher’s position is essential in teaching, the frequency of his / her mistakes should be minimal because the learners acquire knowledge from him / her (even errors since learners cannot tell the difference). This fact is even more important in teaching pronunciation as it is a language system which needs to be heard and given proper feedback to. It may also be concluded that the respondents were not aware of their teacher’s mistakes during their previous studies and may carried his / her errors to their further study and use of English.

#### **i) Question Number 15**

*“Did you try to imitate your teacher’s pronunciation to improve your own?”*

In the following question the author asks the respondents if one of the ways they tried to improve their pronunciation was imitating their teacher’s pronunciation. Eighteen (62%) respondents confirmed they had tried to imitate it and twelve (38%)

respondents denied this fact. Out of eighteen respondents who had tried to imitate their teacher's pronunciation ten simultaneously stated they retrospectively realized their teacher had made pronunciation mistakes and six respondents were not able to tell. If the respondents had imitated their teacher and now realized the errors he / she made, they may make those errors even nowadays and it may be difficult for them to erase them. This fact only further confirms the importance of the teacher in learning pronunciation as the learners could see his / her pronunciation habits as undisputable. Therefore, teacher's intelligibility is essential for learners' intelligibility. If they acquire bad pronunciation habits in school it will be close to impossible to erase them in later years.

#### **j) Question Number 16**

*“Did your teacher correct your pronunciation in classes?”*

Even though eighteen (62%) out of thirty respondents stated that their teacher had made pronunciation mistakes, twenty-three (76%) out of thirty also claimed that their teacher had sometimes corrected their pronunciation and other 24% of respondents stated they had always been corrected. Every of those 24% respondents also stated that they think their teacher had not made pronunciation mistakes. But not every pronunciation mistake should be corrected as it depends on the goal of the exercise. If the exercise is focused on the fluency, the teacher should not interrupt the learner after every mistake made. It is when accuracy is the focus of an exercise the teacher should notify the learner about the mistakes made. This questionnaire does not take these factors into consideration and thus cannot provide deeper evaluation of this question.

### k) Question Number 17

“Do you think you improved your pronunciation outside English classes? If so, where?”

The next question investigates if the respondents' English classes were the main source of improving their pronunciation skills. If not, the author asks the respondents to present other sources which helped the respondents improve their pronunciation skills. Five respondents (17%) presented school classes as their main source for learning pronunciation and other five did not know whether they had acquired pronunciation skills mainly in classes or outside of them. The rest that is twenty (66%) respondents confirmed they had improved their pronunciation skills outside class. The most frequent source presented by the respondents was “watching English movies and series” (55%), other related sources were “playing PC games” (10%), “watching YouTube” (10%) and “listening to music” (5%). These sources can be categorized as *entertainment* since the improvement of pronunciation is not their main goal. As Hişmanoğlu claims “pronunciation is very sensitive to emotional factors [...]” (2006, p. 105). Therefore, the respondents could unknowingly create an ideal state for learning for themselves by being physically relaxed and emotionally calm and in that state the acquisition of pronunciation can be subconscious even. Other frequent sources were “travelling abroad” (40%) with England being the most common destination and “communicating with native speakers” (30%). As was stated by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin – “more frequent contact with the target language results in higher success in language learning” (2010, p. 18). This statement is even further supported by the research of Trofimovich and Baker (2007, p. 257) which proved that constant exposure to the target language produced better pronunciation than learning pronunciation in class environment. Other sources

presented by the respondents were “reading” (5%) and “language courses” (5%). The author believes that the era of technology in which the respondents grew up pushed standard tangible sources in the corner as even books can be downloaded or directly read on the Internet.

#### **l) Question Number 18**

*“Do you think the focus on English pronunciation was sufficient in your classes?”*

The following question asks the respondents about their satisfaction with the frequency of teaching pronunciation in their classes. Six respondents (21%) believed the focus on pronunciation in their classes had been sufficient, five (17%) respondents could not tell whether it had been sufficient or not and eighteen (62%) claimed the focus which had been put on teaching pronunciation was unsatisfactory. The result to this question was somewhat anticipated by the author as the most frequently taught skills and systems of English did not correspond with respondents’ perception of the most important ones.

#### **m) Question Number 19**

*“Do you think that your Czech accent influenced your intelligibility when speaking English?”*

As the influence of the simultaneous study of multiple foreign languages on English pronunciation was disproved, the following section investigates the influence of respondents’ mother tongue. Out of thirty respondents twenty (66%) of them believed their intelligible pronunciation while speaking English was negatively affected by their Czech accent and also fourteen (70%) of those respondents were among those who claimed their English pronunciation skills were not affected by the other foreign languages they studied. What the author concluded is that the respondents could see their mother-language accent as an obstacle in the way to

native-like pronunciation because of the differences between the English and the Czech sound systems. In some areas, they may be so significant as to cause *communication breakdown* and Czech learners may never master such areas, which could be discouraging even. But they should see their mother-language accent as a reminder of the society they are part of, not as an obstacle on the way to intelligibility. There are number of varieties and accents of the English language and every have its own special features, therefore, acquiring native-like pronunciation is only relative and should not be seen as the main goal of learning pronunciation.

#### n) Question Number 20

*“Do you think teaching / learning pronunciation should be an essential part of every English class?”*

The last question investigates whether the respondents’ overall opinion about the necessity of pronunciation in English classes is identical with the author’s. The answers to this question resulted very one-sidedly. Twenty-seven out of thirty (90%) respondents believed so and only three (10%) did not consider pronunciation to be an essential part of every English class. What the author concluded from such result is the same he believes observed in himself. Thanks to their university education they acquired perspective about teaching English and the English language itself and feel the emphasis put on teaching pronunciation in Czech schools is not proportional to its importance.

#### D. Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to investigate the experience EFL learners have with teaching / learning pronunciation at Czech schools from elementary to secondary level of education and discover their opinion about the necessity of including teaching pronunciation in lesson plans.

The research first investigated the educational background of the respondents as the elementary level of education was the most common starting point of their studies. Nowadays, that number should be even higher as study of a foreign language is compulsory for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. Most of the respondents then studied at grammar schools and continued their studies on the university level. During their studies at secondary level of education, vast majority studied more than one foreign language which the most commonly was German. The influence of the European Union may play a role in this data since English and German are its most common languages. In the past, the obligatory language was Russian due to the influence of communism in our country until 1989. Moreover, the respondents do not consider English pronunciation to be significantly easier or harder than that of any other foreign language they studied nor they think that the study of several foreign languages had any impact on their English pronunciation.

The comparison of English skills and systems and also history and culture showed the respondents considered speaking and pronunciation as the most important skill and system. But following data showed their experience did not correlate with their opinions as those two were seen as the most neglected and the most emphasis was put on grammar and vocabulary. Following questions only further confirmed the result of previous ones as majority claimed rarely any attention was given to pronunciation and related exercises were dealt with only occasionally.

The significance of the teacher in teaching / learning pronunciation was explained in the theoretical part but the data analysed from the questionnaire showed respondents' teachers made errors during their teaching. Some used Czech symbols of phonetic transcription which can cause confusion in pronunciation. Also, more than half of the respondents claimed they had tried to imitate their teacher's

pronunciation but simultaneously stated they retrospectively realized the mistakes their teacher had made. Adopting those errors in an early age may still have negative effect on their pronunciation nowadays. The outside-class sources which contributed to the respondents' improvement of English pronunciation were listed with the most common sources being categorized as *entertainment*. As the goal of those sources is not to learn, the acquisition of the knowledge may be subconscious and thus more appealing to the respondents. The respondents felt their Czech accent negatively affected their English pronunciation as some of the differences between the sound systems of those two languages are too significant. But nowadays there are so many varieties and accents of English that the Czech accent should not be considered an obstacle. The last question showed the respondents feel pronunciation should be an essential part of every English class which the author ultimately agrees with.

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## V. Appendices

### EFL Student's Experience with Learning Pronunciation

*Tick the right answer if it is not said otherwise*

**At what level(s) of education did you study English?**

Elementary (1-4<sup>th</sup> grade)      Lower secondary (5-9<sup>th</sup> grade)      Secondary

**At what kind of secondary school did you study?**

.....

**Did you also study another foreign language?**

Yes    No

*If you answer was **NO**, skip to question n. 7*

**Which other foreign language did you study?**

.....

**In your opinion, which pronunciation was easier to learn?**

- English pronunciation
- Pronunciation of the other foreign language
- Both pronunciation were equally difficult

**Did studying another foreign language influence your pronunciation of the English language?**

Yes                  No                  I do not know

**On the scale from 1 to 5 grade the following skills and systems of English and also history and culture according to their importance (1 being the most important)**

Grammar	Listening
Pronunciation	Reading
Vocabulary	Writing
Speaking	History and culture

**Which of the following were most frequently taught at school?**

Grammar	Listening
Pronunciation	Reading
Vocabulary	Writing
Speaking	History and culture

**Which of the following were most neglected at school?**

Grammar	Listening
Pronunciation	Reading
Vocabulary	Writing
Speaking	History and culture

**How often was pronunciation practised in your classes?**

- Every class
- Every other class
- Rarely Never
- In another way (please specify):.....

**What symbols of phonetic transcription did you use in school? (Transcribe the word *Chat*)**

- /tʃet/
- /tʃæt/
- Did not mark at all
- In another way (please specify):.....

**Did you do exercises whose focus was solely on pronunciation?**

Always                                      Sometimes                                      Never

**Were those exercises part of your textbooks?**

Yes                                      No                                      Some of them

**Did your teacher make pronunciation mistakes?**

Yes                                      No                                      I am not able to tell

**Did you try to imitate your teacher's pronunciation to improve your own?**

Yes                                      No

**Did your teacher correct your pronunciation in classes?**

Always                                      Sometimes                                      Never

**Do you think you improved your pronunciation outside English classes? If so, where?**

- Yes (please specify):.....

- No
- I do not know

**Do you think the focus on English pronunciation was sufficient in your classes?**

Yes                      No                      I do not know

**Do you think that your Czech accent influenced your intelligibility when speaking English?**

Yes                      No

**Do you think teaching / learning pronunciation should be an essential part of every English class?**

Yes                      No

**Appendix A** Questionnaire dealing with EFL Students' Experience with Learning Pronunciation