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Оригинални  
научни рад

doi: 10.5937/inovacije1602067J

## ***Serbian EFL Teachers' Attitudes Regarding Their Students' Pronunciation Problems and Strategies for Overcoming Them***

*Summary:* Issues regarding the effectiveness of systematic pronunciation teaching remain unresolved in the existing linguistic literature, and the studies related to teachers' views are scarce. Hence, the present paper investigates Serbian EFL secondary school teachers' views regarding their students' pronunciation difficulties, i.e. we attempted to discover the level of teachers' awareness of their students' problematic areas in practical English phonetics and potential strategies employed in overcoming them, further aiming to draw attention to the importance of the reportedly neglected pronunciation instruction. In order to answer the proposed research questions of the study we conducted a questionnaire, whose results demonstrated that, although Serbian EFL teachers recognize their students' pronunciation problems and are also familiar with the ways they can be made easier, they fail to practically apply them in everyday curriculum.

*Key words:* pronunciation teaching, teachers' attitudes, pronunciation problems

### **Introduction**

The views regarding the teachability of pronunciation in EFL classrooms are opposing in the existing literature, ranging from those authors who believe learners should strive to achieve native-like proficiency, negating the influence of explicit pronunciation teaching, to those who advocate mere intelligibility underscoring the communicative aspect in the command of foreign language, thus approving the positive effect pronunciation instruction

may provide (Scovel 2000). However, some authors point to the fact that teachers may not be appropriate evaluators of the students' pronunciation intelligibility since they got used to their pronunciation and cannot properly judge whether it is understandable for others (Munro, Derwing 1995). Teachers are suggested to thoroughly ponder upon the notion of intelligibility, i.e. to precisely define what is meant by it, since it does not only entail problems of pronunciation and foreign accent, but other extralinguistic factors, as well. Although certain studies disapproved of the positive outcomes of pronunciation

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intervention in EFL classrooms (Purcell, Suter 1980; Pica 1994) resulting in the deficiency of research in pronunciation teaching methodology, nevertheless, there are studies concluding that the presentation of segmental and suprasegmental features of a language being studied, in this case German, might significantly improve ultimate attainment of accurate pronunciation (Moyer 1999). Opinions regarding which level of phonology to teach are likewise discrepant. Namely, even though traditional drill-oriented exercises such as minimal pairs that emphasize the segmental part of English phonology are probably the most popular if applied at all, current studies underline that the greater importance in pronunciation teaching and learning lies in instructing students to acquire suprasegmental features (Morley 1994; Gilbert 1995). For drill exercises to be effective, students need to understand the purpose of the practice as well as comprehend what they are asked to pronounce. Monotonous repetition of teachers' pronunciation does not often yield favourable results, quite the contrary (Tice 2004).

It goes without saying, nevertheless, that teachers' views should be taken into consideration since they help students acquire knowledge, encourage them to set and achieve aims in learning and guide them through the activities that develop critical thinking skills (Ryba, Anderson 1990). Moreover, teachers should be aware of their students' learning difficulties in order to make successful attempts at overcoming them.

The present study hence aims to investigate the attitudes of Serbian EFL teachers related to their students' pronunciation problems in order to draw attention to this often forgotten part of EFL teaching. The paper was inspired by a recent research by Ahmad and Muhiburrahman (2013) who explored Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on errors their students make in consonant production.

## Theoretical Background and Previous Research

Nowadays the number of pronunciation studies has considerably increased, which is probably caused by the shift in opinion related to the importance of pronunciation for spoken communicability in a foreign language, English in our case. Possessing the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary seems to be insufficient for making a positive impression on the interlocutor in a foreign language being studied, and a good command of pronunciation may even mask the lack of proficiency in the previously mentioned areas (Burns 2003). Furthermore, special space is being devoted to teaching pronunciation in the curriculum, with specially designed exercises and activities, which is a significant improvement whatsoever (Pourhosein 2012). Pronunciation instruction thus provides indispensable perceptual and productive experience enabling learners' to adequately develop their interlanguage phonology (Pennington 1994). Accurate pronunciation is a marker of a learner's proficiency, and a crucial segment in learning oral skills that may influence a learner's willingness to use the language practically (McDonald 2002). In order to be fully effective, classroom instruction should develop phonological competence by systematically presenting phonetic forms to learners with the appropriate teacher feedback included. Several pronunciation techniques were proved successful when consistently applied, especially explicit explanation, metalinguistic feedback, intensive training focused on individual sounds as well as complete sentences and recasts as forms of teacher feedback (Derwing et al. 1998; Bradlow et al. 1997; Lyster 1998). Seldom do instructors focus on features of connected speech, however.

Having the previously mentioned issues pertaining to the problem of intelligibility in mind, as well as the lack of research regarding the appropriate pronunciation teaching methods and techniques and insufficient time and space devoted to the aspect of pronunciation in EFL curricula and text-

books, the confusion of EFL teachers resulting in the negligence of pronunciation seems inevitable and comprehensible. Teachers either completely avoid teaching pronunciation, or randomly devote a few minutes during the usual grammar and vocabulary teaching lesson (Harmer 2001). The benefits of an efficient pronunciation training are by no means negligible. Intelligible pronunciation is said to increase learners' confidence and promote interactions outside the classroom (Morley 1991), and to change learners' social acceptance even, since heavy foreign accent may lead to negative stereotypes and discrimination at job interviews e.g. (Derwing et al. 2002). Lack of confidence for oral communication in a foreign language and reduced intelligibility often cause misjudgments regarding learners' overall knowledge or decision making (Morley 1998). Pronunciation hence has a considerable socio-cultural value (Gelvanovsky 2002), as well, since it may determine how others perceive, understand and judge us.

Relatedly, pronunciation instruction represents a challenge for EFL teachers for various reasons. The greatest amount of research of teachers' beliefs is related to the teaching of grammar (Phipps, Borg 2009), the teaching of reading (Johnson 1992) and vocabulary instruction (Zhang 2008). Studies have also focused on the opinions of teachers regarding the use of technology in the classroom and the types of materials (Lam 2000). Fewer studies have concentrated on teachers' attitudes about the teaching of pronunciation, however. Three such studies seem particularly relevant for our investigation. At a university in Colombia, Cohen and Fass (2001) found that, according to teachers' views, students' language performance was assessed based on their pronunciation and grammatical accuracy rather than fluency and intelligibility. In Australia, MacDonald (2002) reported that teachers lacked motivation to assess pronunciation due to scarce guidelines especially since the curriculum did not possess clear objectives regarding this aspect of ELT. According to the afore mentioned study, teachers ad-

ressed the issue of pronunciation only if necessary, and usually separately from the rest of the lesson. Greek teachers believe that native speaker should be the model for foreign language pronunciation, indicating teachers' lack of awareness of the potentialities of English as an International Language and its relation to EFL classroom practices (Sifakis, Sougari 2005).

One of the reasons may be the stated lack of time and unfamiliarity with the creative tools and methods for teaching students how to pronounce English sounds and sentences (Gilbert 2008). Instead, teaching pronunciation revolves around typical drilling exercises, often boring for both teachers and students, which normally leads to disappointing effects. Another, even more serious issue, is the question of how to view perception and production, since there are no clear guidelines on how to teach them even though both of them are recognized as significant in successful FL acquisition (Bradlow et al. 1997). Moreover, teachers state that they are not provided with appropriate textbooks that may help them improve their own pronunciation as well as coursebooks and materials for the suitable pronunciation instruction for students (Fraser 2000), with the main emphasis of textbooks being the teaching of phonetic symbols and pronunciation of individual sounds (Dahmardeh 2009). Even if there are certain explanations and suggestions, they are never level-specific, i.e. there are very few papers (Murphy 1991; Gilbert 2001) providing directions pointing to activities appropriate at a specific level of proficiency, with the most activities planned for high-level students. The situation is similar with other languages, as well. Namely, studies report insufficient devotion to pronunciation in textbooks in France (Loiseau 2008), Sweden (Olsson 2011) and Canada (Molinié 2010). Other studies pointed to teachers' lack of confidence as one of the reasons for avoiding pronunciation instruction (Brown 1992; Yates 2001). Fraser (2002) listed the reasons EFL teachers avoid teaching pronunciation and stressed their falsehood. According to this author, teachers claim

that pronunciation is a talent and cannot be taught, students hate talking in class, there is not enough time and explicit correction is intrusive. However, the real reason may be that teachers do not actually know how to teach pronunciation. Furthermore, another study demonstrated that the majority of teachers never plan pronunciation teaching (Walker 1999). The situation seems to be similar with Serbian EFL teachers, as well. One of our previous studies showed that Serbian EFL teachers avoid teaching pronunciation predominantly due to the alleged lack of time, available resources and equipment (Jerotijević 2014). Some authors, however, indicate that teachers regard pronunciation as the least useful skill in EFL learning, so they neglect teaching it in order to have more time for teaching other “more important” linguistic areas (Elliot 1995). Another discouraging reason why pronunciation teaching is not so popular is the lack of immediately visible results and students usually forget about the feature they practised when they encounter the item in question in a novel context. Teaching pronunciation is not an easy task, whatsoever, and there are several important aspects to consider. Namely, a teacher needs to carefully decide what to focus on, and to adjust the chosen activities to different learning styles. Additionally, a teacher should cautiously choose the amount and type of corrective feedback, as well as exhaustively plan how to assess students’ performance in both perception and production. When teaching pronunciation, EF instructors should not be hindered by the fact that each student in a classroom may have a different pronunciation problem. Supposing that they are well acquainted with both phonetic systems they have to acknowledge the inevitable mother tongue interference and to know how to provide useful clues for students to minimize the influence as much as possible. There are several ways in which teachers can deal with pronunciation problems: mechanical (minimal pair drills and repetitions), contextualized (listening and repeating a key word), meaningful (choosing the correct word in a sentence), realistic (role-plays) and real (talking

to students about their everyday life matters) (Pennington 1996).

## **Methodology**

### ***The Aim of the Study***

The study aims at discovering Serbian EFL secondary school teachers’ views pertaining to their students’ pronunciation difficulties and the possible ways for overcoming them.

### ***Research Questions***

The present research was based on the following research questions:

1. Are Serbian EFL teachers aware of their students’ pronunciation problems?
2. What are the most problematic areas in English pronunciation for Serbian students, according to their teachers?
3. What are the possible ways for overcoming the afore mentioned difficulties, according to teachers’ opinion?

### ***Participants***

The total of 32 secondary school teachers from Jagodina, Kragujevac, Nis, Kraljevo, Cacak, Leskovac and Belgrade took part in the survey. The particular sample was chosen to ensure the validity of the results, since all the participants teach two final years of secondary schools.

### ***Instruments***

The primary instrument for gathering data was a questionnaire with Likert-scale question types as well as open-ended questions. The questionnaire was adapted from Ahmad and Muhiburrahman (2013).

**Procedure**

The questionnaire was distributed via email or personally during the second semester of the 2012/2013 school year.

**Data Analysis**

Percentage scores were counted for all the answers, and answers to open-ended questions were qualitatively elaborated on.

**Results and Discussion**

To ensure clarity of presentation, the results of the Likert-scale type of questions and open-ended questions are provided in the ensuing tables and graphs respectively.

**Results of the Likert-scale questions**

More than a half of the teachers believe that their students have poor pronunciation, however they report that their students do not receive sufficient pronunciation instruction during the regular English classes. The majority of teachers overtly agree that listening to music and watching TV and movies in English helps improve L2 pronunciation, as well as exercises such as reading aloud with the support of both recorded material and the instructor himself. Around 80% of the participants in the survey regard situational dialogues as a useful tool for overcoming pronunciation difficulties. All the teachers agree that students can benefit from teachers' explanations about the pronunciation of sounds represented by an appropriate phonetic symbol, which is discrepant with the fact that they believe

Table 1. General questions on the problems and strategies

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you think that Serbian students have poor English pronunciation?	12.5%	50%	/	31.25%	6.25%
Do you think the students receive enough pronunciation instruction in their present English courses?	12.5%	15.63%	15.63%	53.13%	3.13%
Does listening to English songs help in improving pronunciation?	21.88%	59.38%	6.25%	12.5%	/
Does reading aloud with the support of the recorded English material help in improving pronunciation?	37.5%	56.25%	6.25%	/	/
Does watching English programs on TV help in improving pronunciation?	31.25%	53.13%	12.5%	3.13%	/
Does watching English movies help in improving pronunciation?	34.38%	53.13%	12.5%	/	/
Does reading aloud with the teacher's support help in improving pronunciation?	40.63%	56.25%	/	3.13%	/
Does having situational dialogues help in improving pronunciation?	28.13%	53.13%	15.63%	3.13%	/
Does the teachers' explanation of how to pronounce phonetic symbols help in improving pronunciation?	56.25%	43.75%	/	/	/
Do minimal-pair practices help in improving pronunciation?	62.5%	34.38%	3.13%	/	/

Table 2. The frequency of the application of strategies

Questions	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Do you apply any of the previously mentioned ways of improving pronunciation in your regular English lessons?	/	53.13%	46.88%	/
With regard to each item, is it taught or do you practise it in your English classes?	6.25%	43.75%	50%	/
Word pronunciation				
Oral reading of textbook	25%	50%	18.75%	6.25%
Vowel pronunciation	18.75%	43.75%	31.25%	6.25%
Consonant pronunciation	15.63%	34.38%	43.75%	6.25%
How often do you teach the following pronunciation items?				
Sounds	12.5%	46.88%	37.5%	3.13%
IPA	15.63%	15.63%	37.5%	31.25%
Stress	/	12.5%	50%	37.5%
Rhythm	/	9.38%	46.88%	43.75%
Intonation	/	3.13%	43.75%	53.13%

their students do not receive adequate and sufficient phonetic instruction. Teachers likewise view minimal pair drills as beneficial for pronunciation improvement.

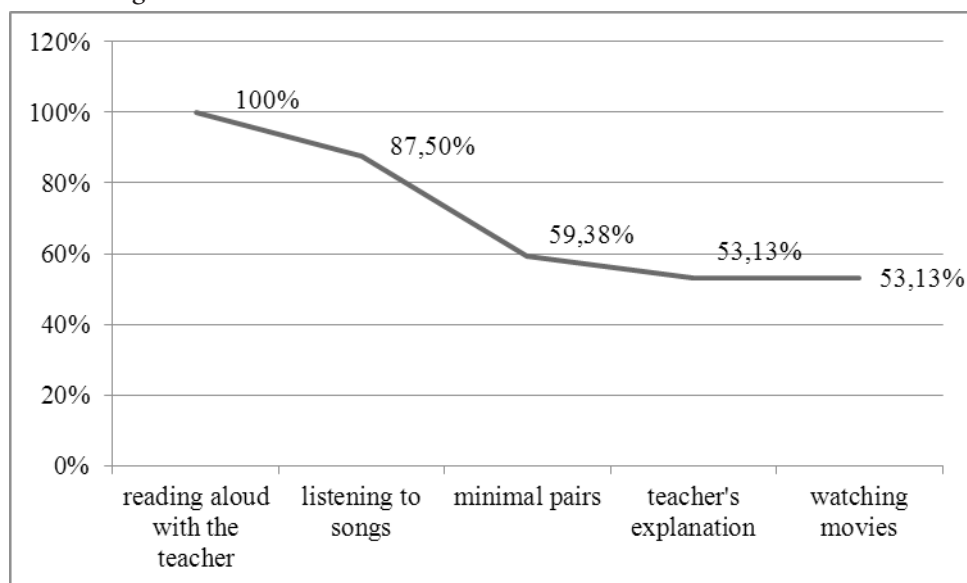
Although the majority of the teachers agree that the afore mentioned ways for improving pronunciation can be beneficial for pronunciation enhancement, a large percentage (46.88%) of interviewees reports that they rarely use them in class. The percentage is similar to those who use the strategies often, so we are dealing with split opinions so to speak. The greatest percentage of teachers uses oral reading of the textbook as one of the major tools for practicing pronunciation, which is probably the remnant of the exceeded, but in Serbia still popular Grammar-Translation method. It is interesting to note that a larger number of teachers practices vowels more frequently than consonants, probably due to the fact that English possesses more vowels in the phonological inventory than Serbian. However, the previously mentioned goes in line with the fact that teachers focus more on the segmental level of phonology since more than 50% of them prefer to teach sounds often. IPA symbols are

rarely taught, which makes it difficult for students to write down the problematic pronunciation on their own with the appropriate symbols, instead they frequently resort to writing the pronunciations in their mother tongue. The suprasegmental level of English phonology is rarely or never taught which can be concluded from the results that more than 80% of teachers rarely or never teach stress, rhythm and intonation.

#### *Results of the open-ended questions*

The afore presented part of the survey contained the question regarding how often teachers employed different ways of improving intonation, yet they were expected to list the most frequently applied strategies in the open-ended part of the questionnaire. The results showed that reading aloud with the help of the teacher was the most popular technique, as well as listening to songs and minimal pairs drilling. Surprisingly enough, more than a half of the teachers reported to have implemented explanations as one of the techniques as well as watching films during the regular English classes.

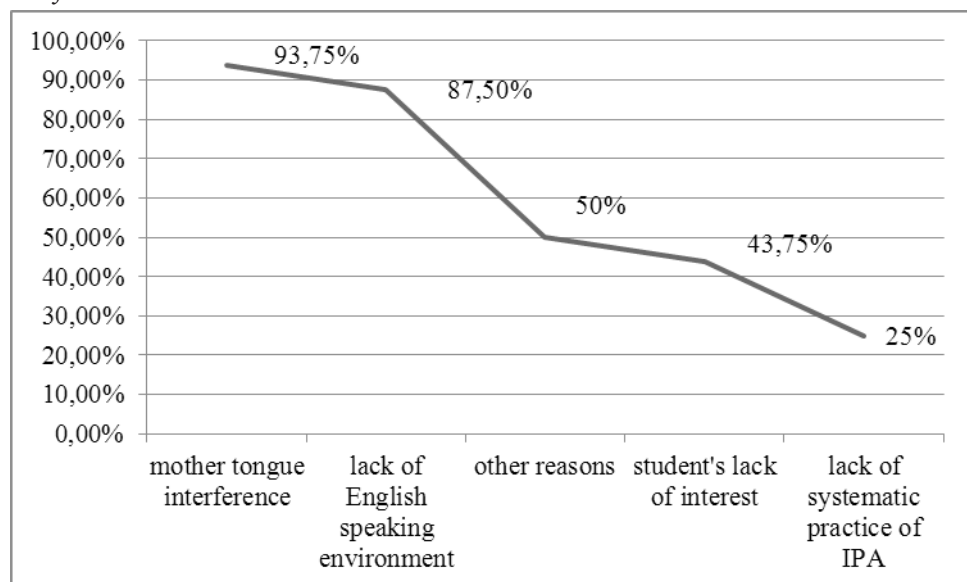
Graph 1. Learners' Strategies



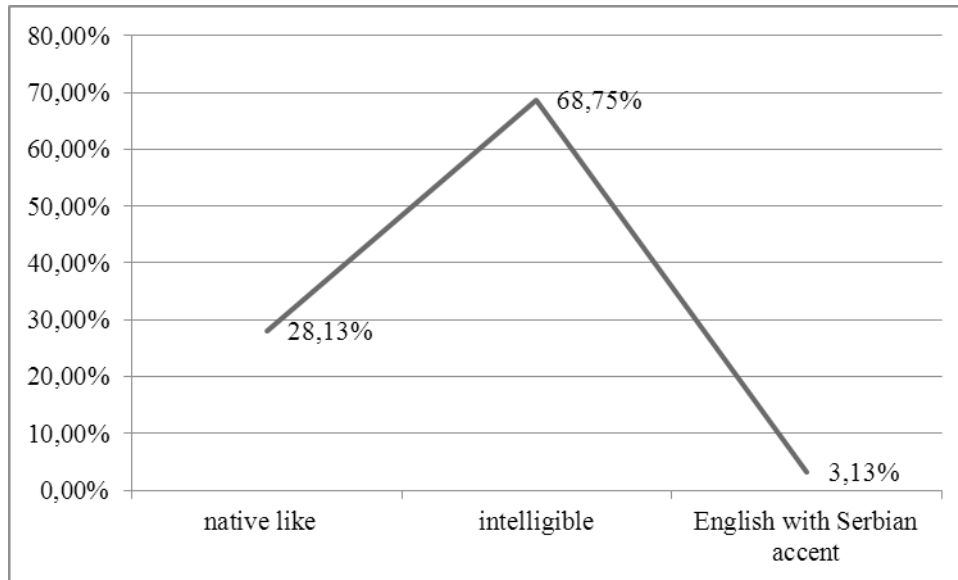
The next question required that teachers list the possible causes for their students' pronunciation difficulties. The participants think that mother tongue interference represents the most important reason that triggers pronunciation problems. Lack

of English speaking environment, i.e. genuine L2 input, seems to be another significant cause for pronunciation problems. Slightly less than a half of the teachers believes that students' lack of interest might be the source of problems, and only 25% of teachers

Graph 2. Causes of Pronunciation Problems



Graph 3. Proficiency Aspirations

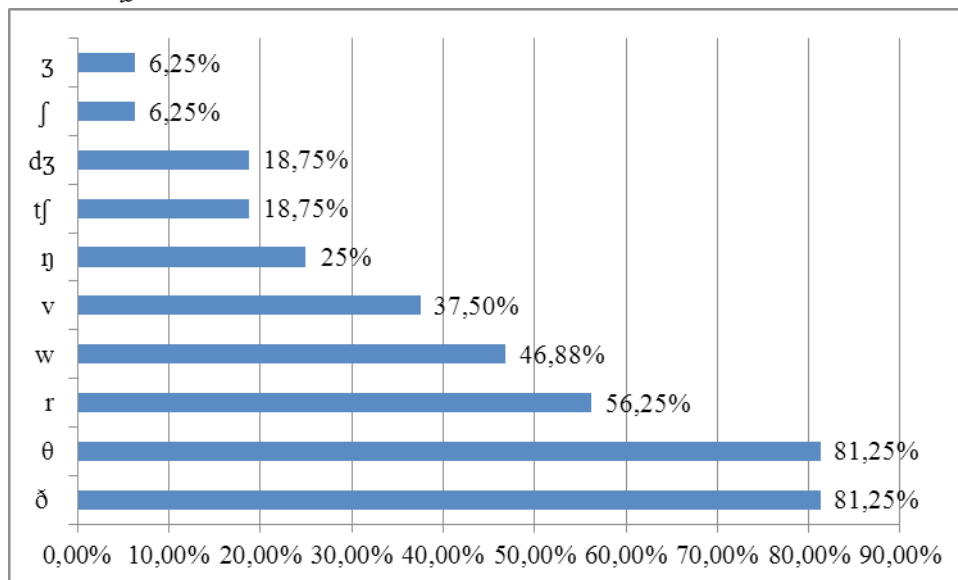


regard lack of systematic practice of phonetic transcription as the reason why their students have pronunciation difficulties.

According to the interviewed teachers, the goal for the students should be intelligible pronun-

ciation, yet it is interesting that almost a third of the teachers see native-like proficiency as the aspiring goal which mismatches the fact that students almost completely lack systematic phonetic instruction.

Graph 4. Consonants Difficult to Pronounce





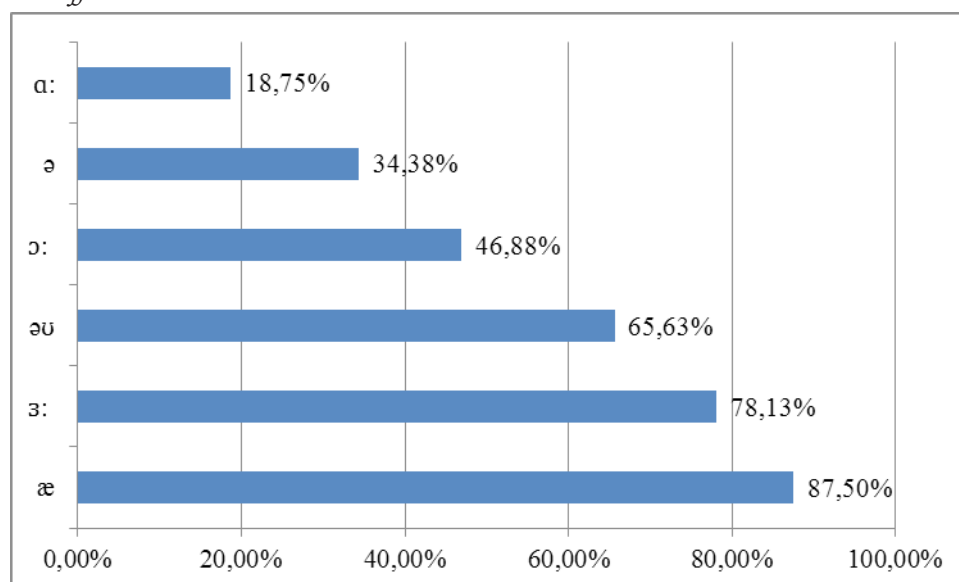
Regarding the opinion of teachers as to what consonant sounds are the most difficult to pronounce for Serbian students, the greatest percentage sees both voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives as the most demanding to pronounce, followed by the approximants /r/ and /w/ and other English consonants. The results point to the fact that Serbian teachers believe that the consonants absent from Serbian phonological inventory and present in English, represent the greatest challenge for the students.

According to the teachers participating in the survey, the most problematic vowels for Serbian students are monophthongs /æ/ and /ɜ:/, and a diphthong /əʊ/, once again vowels that are absent from Serbian vocalic inventory.

The results of the conducted questionnaire generally match the findings from the previous study by Ahmad and Muhiburrahman (2013) (naturally the exact percentage scores differ, but the overall results are similar), except for several incongruities which we shall elaborate on. Unlike the teachers from the present study who reported never to have taught suprasegmental features of English pronun-

ciation, around 50% of Saudi teachers sometimes instruct their students regarding rhythm, stress and intonation. Interestingly enough, Serbian teachers agree that songs can improve pronunciation, while 50% of Saudi teachers do not believe so. Serbian teachers declared that native-like proficiency should be the desired goal in learning in a greater percentage, i.e. three times higher than Saudi teachers, which probably has to do with the applied teaching approach. Understandably, due to the distinct phonological systems of Serbian and Arabic, the reported consonants that are difficult for students according to the teachers differ significantly. Namely, while the teachers from the previous study think their students have the greatest problems pronouncing /p/, /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/ and /ŋ/, Serbian teachers believe interdental fricatives are the most demanding to pronounce, while /v/, /tʃ/, /ʒ/ and /ŋ/, although on the list of problematic sounds, follow with significantly lower percentage.

*Graph 5. Vowels Difficult to Pronounce*



## Conclusion

A brief account of the basic theoretical notions related to the study is followed by the results of the conducted questionnaire aiming to investigate Serbian EFL teachers' attitudes regarding their students' pronunciation problems and potential strategies employed for overcoming them.

Although Serbian teachers believe their students have poor pronunciation of English, little is actually done in terms of specific phonetic instruction that might moderate the existing problems. Especially alarming is the negligence of the suprasegmental level L2 phonology, i.e. rhythm, stress and intonation.

The possible limitations of the study may be the number of the participants as well as the level of English they teach. Perhaps the results would have been different had we conducted the research with college teachers working with students of advanced proficiency. However, the study once again pointed to the general neglect of pronunciation instruction, even though apparently there is a recognized need for it. Thus the suggestion for the teachers, based on the findings in our paper, would be increased systematic instruction of both segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation through various communicative and cooperative techniques and activities, including the available online resources.

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Даница Јеротијевић Тишма

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### Ставови српских наставника енглеског језика као страног о проблемима у изговору и стратегијама за њихово превазилажење

**Резиме:** У истренуишно оишијеирихваћеној и истираживаној лииериатури међујезичке фонолоије остиају нерешена иишања у вези са ефикасносии наставе изговора енглеској језика као сираној, а иакође је мало радова који се иичу савова наставника ирема иешкоћама са којима се ученици сусрећу ири савладавању изговора. У српском научном кониекстиу, колико нам је иознаио, даиих радова иоиво да нема уоишије. Може се рећи да је нерешеност иишања у вези са ефикасносии ирисииуиа настави изговора иоследица несуласица у вези са циљевима у савладавању изговора, јер је добро иознаиа дебатиа око иоиа чему иреда иежиии у изговору сираној језика – оишиој разумљивосии или изговору налик маиерњим иоворницима (Scovel, 2000). Сам иојам разумљивосии изговора се нерейко иреисиииује, ие се наставницима саветује да иажљиво ироуче иша он иодразумева, како би на адекватан начин ироцењивали изговор својих ученика, јер ионеки ауиори чак смаирају да наставници нису меродавни оцењивачи изговора, јер су се навикли на артикулацију својих ученика (Munro, Derwing, 1995).

Сииоа се наш рад дави ироучавањем савова српских наставника енглеској језика као сираној ирема иоиешкоћама у изговору са којима су суочени њихови ученици на свакодневном нивоу. Дакле, иокушали смо да оикријемо у којој мери су наставници свесни иосиојања ироблема у изговору код ученика, као и да ли су уиознаии са моиућим сираиееијама које ученици користе да их иревазићу, ие да још једном скренемо иажњу на иомало занемарени сеиенни учења енглеској језика као сираној, ио јесии на наставу изговора. Како бисмо одговорили на иосиављена истираживачка иишања, сировели смо анкеиу, дакле, иримарни инстируменит за ирикуиљање иодаиака била је анкеиа, модификована из једне иреиходне сидује (Ahmad, Muhiburrahman, 2013) која је садржала иишања са Ликериовом скалом одговора, као и иишања оивореној ииша. Анкеиу смо сировели иоком друој иолуоидишиа 2012/2013. школске иодине иуиетем елекииронске иоише или лично. Укуино иридесет и два наставника енглеској језика у средњим школама у Јаодини, Крајујевицу, Нишу, Краљевицу, Чачку, Лесковцу и Београду учесииовала су у анкеиирању. Даии узорак изабран је како бисмо иоишииовали крииеријум валидносии и иоузданосии, јер су изабрани наставници сви иредавали иоследњим двема иодинама средње школе. За анализу добијених иодаиака користиили смо се квантиишииивном и квалиишииивно-дескриишииивном методом, наине, ироценшииуални ирорачун коришииен је за израчунавање одговора са Ликериовом скалом, док су одговори на иишања оивореној ииша квалиишииивно образложени.

Резуишиии анкеије су иоказали да српски наставници смаирају да ученици иенерално имају лош изговор енглеској језика, али се у реалносии вело мало иоиа иредузима како би се иоседно осмишљеним ироирамом наставе, или дела наставе, ублажили иосиојећи ироблеми. Нарочиито је забрињавајуће иоиво иоишииуно занемаривање ирозодијских особеносии сираној језика, ио јесии рииа, акцениа и иншиионације. Даиа сииуација је један од реишких асие-

каја у којима резултати наше студије одуговлаче, у којој је сироведена слична анкета, док се већина одговора на остала питања углавном слаже са ранијим налазима (Ahmad, Muhiburrahman, 2013).

Број испитаника може додатно представљати ограничење нашег истраживања, као и ниво доспелости на ком предају. Могуће је да би се добили другачији резултати уколико би се анкета сировела са факултетским наставницима, где су студенти на напредном нивоу.

Без обзира на то, рад је још једном потврдио важност скрепања јаже на систематичну наставу изговора, самим тим, и на оштре маринализоване наставе изговора у српским учионицама у којима се енглески језик учи као страни. Резултати сироведене анкете указују на неопходност јажевој присува настави изговора не само на нивоу фонема већ и на прозодијском нивоу, кроз разне комуникативне и кооперативне активности, помоћу савремених техника и маала попут рачунара и интернета, и осталих доступних материјала.

**Кључне речи:** енглески језик као страни, настава изговора.