

# In Defense of the Usefulness of a Polish-Based Respelling Phonetic Transcription System in the Elementary to Lower-Intermediate EFL Classroom

Lukasz Furtak

**Abstract** Despite its common usage in dictionaries and travel phrase-books, the application of sequences of first-language (here: Polish) letters in order to capture an approximate pronunciation of words in the target language (here: English) (e.g., water ['łote], six ['syks], foreign ['foryn], computer [kym'pjute]) appears not to have been considered a noteworthy pedagogical tool by researchers dealing with teaching EFL phonetics (Cymbalista & Kleparski, 2002). What is more, Sobkowiak (1997) appears to constitute one of the few available comprehensive discussions of the aforementioned technique. The method seems to suffer from a number of major application-related disadvantages ranging from a somewhat aesthetic matter (to a number of teachers it does not make an impression of being sufficiently scientifically-grounded) to theoretical considerations connected with the undeniable arbitrariness of the choice of symbols and their limited usability in the task of reflecting relevant aspects of English phonetics. On the other hand, one may also notice several elements which render the approach appealing from a rather practical perspective. Firstly, this quasi-phonetic code is adequate for users of EFL materials who, broadly speaking, are not, or do not wish to be familiar with the standard IPA phonetic script (high-school students, employees of international corporations, individuals interested in English for travel, or the elderly, to quote just few). Those EFL learners' aim is not phonetic precision itself but rather every-day communication (cf. Sobkowiak, 1997). The aim of the paper is to discuss both the drawbacks and merits of the technique introduced above, concentrating on several crucial aspects of its application (aesthetic, logical, practical, methodological, acoustic, facilitative) and highlighting those elements that learners might benefit from. The discussion is supplemented with a brief analysis of selected EFL resources available on the market and the author's own proposal of a system of letter-based phonetic approximations for usage in the EFL classroom.

---

Ł. Furtak (✉)

The State School of Higher Professional Education in Sandomierz, Sandomierz, Poland  
e-mail: furtakl@o2.pl

## 1 Introduction

In spite of its practicality in the EFL classroom and popularity in phrase books, the phenomenon of respelling has not been frequently referred to by either EFL methodology researchers or phoneticians; hence, the amount of available literature dealing with the topic is undoubtedly scarce. The sources that might be encountered may be divided into the ones which are in favor of respelling and those which, naturally, are against it.

The publications which consider using the orthographic means of the first language a tool worthy of discussion are the ones written by prof. Włodzimierz Sobkowiak. In Sobkowiak (1997), the author argues in favour of a radically simplified phonetic-access dictionary transcription (SPAD) (Sobkowiak, 1997) to be used by intermediate level students in their study of English pronunciation. What is more, the article contains an accurate and detailed proposal of a SPAD as well as some of its systemic properties such as phonetic contrast neutralization (accompanied by the subsequent creation of novel homophonous pairs). Sobkowiak (2007), which is another work in this set, constitutes an attempt at an approximate comparison between the manner in which phonetics was presented in coursebooks published in the past and the way pronunciation is dealt with nowadays. Features such as L1-sensitivity, learner-friendliness and consistency of, broadly speaking, phonetic representations in dictionary entries are also considered in Sobkowiak (2012) which includes a discussion of diverse aspects of presenting phonetic content to dictionary-users from the perspective of their individual needs rather than phonetic precision proper.

On the other hand, Cymbalista and Kleparski (2002) constitutes the sole work the authors of which do not view the phenomenon of respelling sufficiently serious to be considered a didactic tool. They describe Polish-based respelling notations as *déclassé* and primitive claiming that they “(...) take a dubious advantage of the orthographic conventions of the native tongue” (2002, p. 13).

The paper constitutes the expression of the author’s belief that the frequently underrated method of respelling may be considered one of a number of pedagogical tools used during EFL lessons. Naturally, its usage needs to be subject to certain limitations, for instance those referring to the age of the learners, their level of English competence or the aim of the class. In other words, the aim of the paper is to prove that the disadvantages of applying a respelled system of notation do not outweigh the advantages, which renders the method noteworthy, practical and attractive.

## 2 Features of the Respelling System

It might be somewhat problematic to continue the discussion of a respelling system without providing the reader with an overview of the basic features according to which the system has been construed. Therefore, it has been decided that the very

beginning of the body of the paper ought to be devoted to a possibly concrete and clear justification of two crucial properties of the procedure as a result of which English individual sounds as well as clusters might be approximated using the Polish orthography. The properties are the following: (a) a criterion on the basis of which the sound correspondence is conducted and (b) a model of English phonetics used as a donor in the aforementioned procedure.

Firstly, the understanding of the term *respelling* requires clarification. In the current work, *respelling* is interpreted as the result of a two-stage procedure. Phase one consists in approximating an English segment (or a string of segments) to its closest Polish equivalent, whereas the aim of stage two is to code the outcome of stage 1 using Polish letters. In other words, the respelled pronunciation of a word or segment constitutes a Polish-filtered English word (or sound) which has been spelled utilising the available means of the Polish orthography. At this point, it ought to be clear that respelling is not a type of phonetic transcription. Identifying a respelled pronunciation of a word or sound does not involve applying Polish-related symbols to code English sounds in order to facilitate the user's access to English phonetics. What respelling (as understood in the current article) does is provide a Polish-based code to reflect Polish approximations of English sounds in the spelling (for another interpretation of the concept of *respelling*, see Sobkowiak, 2012).

A crucial element to be noticed is that it would be virtually impossible to decide on specific cross-language sound approximations not having determined the criterion on which the aforementioned relations might be based. The question to be asked at this point refers to whether sounds should be approximated on the auditory, articulatory, or acoustic basis? In order to answer it, one needs to understand for what purpose a respelling notation is created in the first place. Apparently, the crucial goal is to make it possible for learners (who are not experts in phonetics) to communicate in English in practical everyday situations such as booking a room at a hotel in Spain or inquiring about the toilet at a shopping center in Germany, or for teachers to be able to present an approximate English pronunciation to their students on the board during an elementary- or lower-intermediate level class of English. Such circumstances require quick and practical access to the pronunciation of the basic phrases which ought to, in turn, be understandable to a listener who may be a native or, more probably, non-native speaker of English themselves.

If one takes this perspective into consideration, the auditory criterion appears to be the most adequate basis for the attribution of cross-language equivalents. In other words, not being familiar with English sounds, the potential user of a respelling code wishes to sound as English as possible using the phonetic means of their own native tongue. The acoustic and articulatory aspects might be (and will be) considered helpful but definitely not decisive due to the non-linear relationship between articulatory gestures and their auditory perception. In order to clarify this point, we might briefly recall the articulatory and acoustic features of two variants of the /r/phoneme encountered in Polish and in English. The former sound, i.e. [r], constitutes a non-lateral alveolar trill whereas the latter one, i.e. [ɾ], is a post-alveolar retroflex approximant. From the acoustic point of view, the Polish trill encountered in everyday speech looks like a series of two taps separated by brief periods of vocalic schwa-like

activity (Jassem, 1973). On the other hand, the formant structure of the English approximant is reminiscent of that of a vocalic segment, with a low F3 and transitions rising steeply to a following vowel (Gimson, 2001), which naturally renders the two segments completely dissimilar both acoustically and articulatorily. And yet, despite the unquestionable differences, both sounds are perceived and decoded as instances or variants of the /t/phoneme. We might also state that perception of speech involves much more than the signal itself. The additional information available to the listener may be related to their familiarity with English spelling or experience listening and decoding heavily accented speech. In other words, the task of decoding a string of phonetic segments such as ['wɔtɜr], which itself is a typical Polish (for a characterisation of the concept of *Polglish*, see Sobkowiak, 1997) mispronunciation of the English word 'water', as the English lexeme *water* appears not to be as formidable either to a native or a non-native speaker of English than it might seem at first sight due to the fact that "[n]ative speakers of English are especially noted for their tolerance of gross mispronunciations (...)" (Sobkowiak, 1997, p. 1801). The explanation for this seeming paradox ought not to be sought in either acoustic or articulatory characteristics of individual segments, but rather in the reality of the process of acquiring (for a native speaker) or learning (for a non-native speaker) of English. A non-native speaker of English had to learn the language on a step-by-step basis, which inevitably involved committing errors and hearing other learners make mistakes as well. As a result, for a non-native speaker, heavily accented English may be much easier to understand than native speech. As far as native speakers are concerned, one should realize that they grow up in English-speaking countries, surrounded by immigrants from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. Individuals whose native tongue is English become accustomed to decoding accented speech due to the fact that, as young people, they are likely to have non-native school friends; what is more, in adult life, they work with immigrants and interact with them. Therefore, even though speaking with an accent may lead to momentary comprehension problems, rarely does it result in the breakdown in communication.

What, then, is the goal of using a respelling notation system in the study of English pronunciation? Somewhat paradoxically, the goal is to be able to sound English-like without being able to pronounce English sounds, communicate in English and at the same time be ignorant of the technicalities of English phonetics. This seemingly self-contradictory statement becomes logical in view of the redundancy of communication presented above.

The other question refers to the choice of a model of English phonetics, or, to be more precise, the native variety of English, to be used as a donor to the process of correspondence. One might be tempted to base the procedure on RP as it is the most common English variety encountered in EFL materials, however, we should not forget that a respelling notation is itself an approximation of English phonetics and its result ought to be understandable to both native and non-native speakers of English. The major goal of putting respelling to use is for a learner to achieve the communicative ability to speak English in everyday situations rather than copy a certain pre-determined accent of English as faithfully as possible. In other words, one ought to ask oneself a question whether we should focus on the needs of the

learner and create a practical user-friendly hassle-free imperfect code, or rather on the theoretical pursuit of phonetic perfection with the aim of constructing a letter-based reproduction of the phonetics of an accent. It appears that the only sensible solution is to find a compromise between the two perspectives, i.e. a system which heavily draws from a pre-selected accent but *sacrifices* some of its elements when effective communication is in danger in order to reduce phonetic contrast neutralisation. With practical communication in mind, the above reasoning leads us to believe that it is fairly sensible to choose RP as the model but not forget that the communicative needs of the user ought to come first. Let us illustrate that with a correspondence based on the two English words, ‘barn’ and ‘bun’. If we decide on RP to be the donor accent, the pronunciation of the lexemes is the following:

barn [ˈbɑːn] → [ˈban] (respelled version)  
 bun [ˈbʌn] → [ˈban] (respelled version)

As can be observed, this solution results in the neutralization of the [ɑː]-[ʌ] contrast, which, in turn, leads to communicative problems. The problem may be by-passed altogether if we eliminate RP as the donor and introduce an element of the spelling into the final phonetic form. In this case, the respelled version would maintain the contrast between the two words:

barn [ˈbɑːn] → [ˈbarn] (respelled version)  
 bun [ˈbʌn] → [ˈban] (respelled version)

The abovementioned solution compromises the pre-selected pronunciation model of the donor for the sake of the preservation of the semantic contrast and maintenance of communication. On the other hand, the ultimate sequences contain an r-like segment, which makes them more similar to rhotic varieties of English. Hence, the non-rhoticity of RP needs to be abandoned for the sake of contrast preservation.

### 3 Proposal of a Respelling System for Vocalic Elements

Having presented the rationale behind acknowledging the auditory perception of foreign segments and contrast preservation as the ultimate criteria to be used in the process of attributing Polish sounds to the English ones, we may proceed with a discussion of the interrelations between the two sets of segments. Table 1 contains an enumeration of English-Polish vocalic correspondences (the symbols reflect the exact positions of Polish vowels in the vowel diagram which have been derived from the account included in Wiśniewski, 1997).

The table included above demonstrates how the two criteria introduced in Sect. 2 influence the ultimate choice of a phonetic form which constitutes a compromise between enhancing auditory similarity and reducing the neutralisation of phonetic contrast.

In the majority of cases, one may observe a strictly auditory-based correspondence between the segmental English *donor* and the respelled Polish result.

**Table 1** Correspondences between English vocalic segments and their Polish equivalents

English sound	Polish sound	Polish letter	Exemplary word (English spelling, IPA transcription, Polish respelling)
i:	i	i	league [ 'li:g ] → [ 'lig ]
e	ɛ	e	head [ 'hed ] → [ 'hed ]
æ	ɛ	e	bad [ 'bæd ] → [ 'bed ]
ɜ:	ɨr	yr	firm [ 'fɜ:m ] → [ 'fyrn ]
ə (word-final)	ɛ	e	water [ 'wɔ:tə ] → [ 'tote ]
ə (word-medial, word-initial)	ɨ	y	police [ pə'li:s ] → [ py'lis ]
ɪ	ɨ	y	hid [ 'hid ] → [ 'hyd ]
ʌ	ɶ	a	bud [ 'bʌd ] → [ 'bad ]
ɑ:	ɶ	a	half [ 'hɑ:f ] → [ 'haf ]
ɑ: (if -ar- in the spelling)	ɶr	ar	farm [ 'fɑ:m ] → [ 'farm ]
ɒ	ɔ	o	dog [ 'dɒg ] → [ 'dog ]
ɔ:	ɔ	o	law [ 'lɔ: ] → [ 'lo ]
ɔ: (if -or-/-our- in the spelling)	ɔ	or	cord [ 'kɔ:d ] → [ 'kord ]
u:	u	u	boot [ 'bu:t ] → [ 'but ]
ʊ	u	u	look [ 'lʊk ] → [ 'luk ]
eɪ	ɛj	ej	race [ 'reɪs ] → [ 'rejs ]
aɪ	ɶj	aj	high [ 'haɪ ] → [ 'haj ]
ɔɪ	ɔj	oj	boy [ 'bɔɪ ] → [ 'boj ]
əʊ	ɔw	oł	low [ 'ləʊ ] → [ 'loł ]
aʊ	ɶw	ał	how [ 'haʊ ] → [ 'hał ]
ɪə	ijɛ	ije	steer [ 'stɪə ] → [ 'stije ]
eə	ɛɛ	ee	where [ 'weə ] → [ 'tee ]
ʊə	uɤ	uɛ	pure [ 'pjʊə ] → [ 'pjute ]
aɪə	ɶjɛ	aje	higher [ 'haɪə ] → [ 'haje ]
eɪə	ɛjɛ	eje	layer [ 'leɪə ] → [ 'leje ]
ɔɪə	ɔjɛ	oje	employer [ ɪm'plɔɪə ] → [ ym'ploje ]
əʊə	ɔwɛ	oɛ	lower [ 'ləʊə ] → [ 'loɛ ]
aʊə	ɶwɛ	aɛ	hour [ 'aʊə ] → [ 'aɛ ]

However, a number of sounds the pronunciation of which had to be partially sacrificed for the sake of the maintenance of communication may be encountered as well. The group of segments consists of the following elements: [ɜ:], [ɑ:], [ɔ:]. All these sounds had to be *enriched* with a spelling-based element, i.e. the letter 'r', if that letter is one of the symbols coding a given vocalic element into the spelling. The introduction of two respelled versions of one English vowel stems from a lack of a one-to-one relationship between the vowel and the manner in which it is reflected in the English orthography. Such addition of a segment does have a phonetic justification as an r-like sound is inserted in rhotic accents of English, which renders the modified sequences more American- or Irish-sounding. That fact does not appear to have any negative bearing on the communicative value of the resultant string of segments though. Such reasoning may have to be compromised, however, in instances of words the pronunciation of which displays the dropping of the 'r' letter which is present in the spelling. If the letter is sounded, the result constitutes a rendering which might be considered utterly incorrect. For a word which belongs to the group of *phonetic exceptions* or *commonly mispronounced words*, an addition of an 'r' that would normally be dropped yields a result which is contrary to the intended one. A teacher applies respelling in order for the students to avoid making mistakes, but this element of the respelling technique appears to enforce committing exactly the mistakes it was supposed to help to omit. The contracted form *weren't* seems to be a case in point here. In RP, its pronunciation consists of just one syllable, i.e. ['wɜ:nt]. However, the most common Polish mispronunciation of the form is ['wɛrɨnt]. In that case, if one insists on sounding the 'r' letter, the result constitutes exactly the pronunciation to be avoided. A sensible solution would be thus to suggest to students (or users) the rendering of this contraction along the lines of ['wɛnt] or ['wɨnt]. A similar reasoning might be conducted in reference to the contracted form *aren't* in order to avoid a common Polish spelling-based mispronunciation, i.e. ['arɛnt]. The above brief discussion of possible respelled Polish-based reflections of the two contractions appears to indicate that, in spite of structured attempts at a theoretically coherent respelling system, each problematic, controversial or non-standard case ought to be considered individually.

The author's professional experience in EFL teaching does point to another solution as far as the EFL classroom treatment of the long schwa is concerned. The vowel appears to be the sole English vocalic segment which cannot be satisfactorily substituted by a Polish sound. Naturally, one may claim that certain Polish vocalic elements are the closest auditory or articulatory equivalents, but the level of auditory similarity between [ɜ:] and, say, either [ɨ] or [ɛ], is considerably lower than that between the English monophthong [e] and the Polish segment [ɛ], or the English [ɪ] and the Polish [ɨ]. In that case, the most straightforward and sensible solution is to devote some classroom time to the introduction and practice of the long schwa. As it appears, the vowel is not as problematic as it might seem and even elementary-level students are able to say it after some practice. It quickly becomes apparent that students' ability to articulate [ɜ:] brings their English to another level and allows the teacher to present words such as *word* or *work* (which

are commonly mispronounced by Polish learners) without unnecessary simplifications. As long as there is only one English sound introduced during the class and the teacher resists the temptation to discuss any other phonemes, the students accept the methodology and become easily accustomed to the notation. An attempt at the introduction of more English sounds or, what is infinitely worse, their IPA symbols, may, during an EFL elementary-level class, result in boredom, disapproval and students' unwillingness to participate.

#### 4 Proposal of a Respelling System for Consonantal Elements

Having discussed the correspondences between English vocalic elements and their Polish respelled counterparts, we may proceed to a characterisation of similar consonantal pairs. As previously, the crucial criterion for the attribution of a Polish respelled equivalent is the auditory dimension of the *donor*, i.e. the English lexeme pronounced in RP English. Table 2 below presents a proposed set of correspondences relating to English consonants.

In the great majority of the cases, the attribution process involves straightforward replacement of an English segment with its Polish counterpart. Naturally, certain phonetic features typical of English, such as the contextually-determined aspiration of fortis plosives, the alveolar place of articulation for [s] and [z], or the velarisation of [ɫ], are lost but the ultimate preservation of contrast, communicative value and effortlessness of access for a potential user cannot be over-estimated.

Some elements of Table 2, however, appear to require a comment. The English dark [ɫ] constitutes a segment which, due to its complex alveo-velar place of articulation and syllabicity, cannot be satisfactorily reflected using the phonetic means available in contemporary Polish phonetics. Therefore, employing a VC sequence appears to be necessary to approximate the segment, on the one hand, and preserve phonetic contrast, on the other hand. Naturally, one ought not to forget that the context-dependent velarisation of the lateral alveolar approximant does not constitute a universal property of all English accents and there are varieties in which all the variants of the phoneme /l/ are not velarised. A similar operation of an application of the VC string seems to be indispensable in order to capture the English syllabic [m] and [n] using the means available in the Polish orthography.

Providing two contextually-sensitive Polish equivalents of the voiced dental fricative has been caused by the fact that the fricative appears to display divergent amount of voicing word-initially and word-finally, on the one hand, and intervocalically, on the other hand. The position at the beginning of a word seems to be optimally reflected using the Polish dental plosive [d] as the fricative is only partially-voiced and frequently undergoes hardening to [d] in non-standard varieties of English (Gimson, 2001). Intervocalic [ð] retains full voicing, which results in higher amplitude; therefore, the resulting segment may be claimed to be best respelled using a Polish fricative (rather than a plosive), the labio-velar [v] being



**Table 2** Correspondences between English obstruents and their Polish equivalents

English sound	Polish sound	Polish letter	Exemplary word (English spelling, IPA transcription, Polish respelling)
s	s	s	sister [ 'sɪstə ] → [ 'syste ]
z	z	z	zoo [ 'zu: ] → [ 'zu ]
f	f	f	fly [ 'flaɪ ] → [ 'flaj ]
v	v	w	veal [ 'vi:l ] → [ 'wil ]
ð (word-final, word-medial)	v	w	rather [ 'rɑ:ðə ] → [ 'rawe ] bathe [ 'beɪð ] → [ 'bejw ]
ð (word-initial)	d	d	these [ 'ði:z ] → [ 'diz ]
θ	f	f	thin [ 'θɪn ] → [ 'fyn ]
ʃ	ʂ	sz	shy [ 'ʃaɪ ] → [ 'szaj ]
ʒ	ʒ	ż	rouge [ 'ru:ʒ ] → [ 'ruż ]
h	x	h	high [ 'haɪ ] → [ 'haj ]
p	p	p	pen [ 'pen ] → [ 'pen ]
b	b	b	bet [ 'bet ] → [ 'bet ]
t	t	t	tip [ 'tɪp ] → [ 'typ ]
d	d	d	done [ 'dʌn ] → [ 'dan ]
k	k	k	kick [ 'kɪk ] → [ 'kyk ]
g	g	g	guy [ 'gaɪ ] → [ 'gaj ]
tʃ	ʧ	cz	China [ 'tʃaɪnə ] → [ 'czajne ]
dʒ	ʤ	dż	Joe [ 'dʒəʊ ] → [ 'dżoł ]
m	m	m	mine [ 'maɪn ] → [ 'majn ]
ŋ (syllabic)	ɲm	ym	rhythm [ 'ɪðm ] → [ 'rywym ]
n	n	n	know [ 'nəʊ ] → [ 'noł ]
ŋ (syllabic)	ɲn	yn	button [ 'bʌtŋ ] → [ 'batyn ]
ŋ	ŋg	ng	king [ 'kɪŋ ] → [ 'kyng ]
l	l	l	law [ 'lɔ: ] → [ 'lo ]
(non-syllabic post-vocalic) ɫ	l	l	bill [ 'bɪɫ ] → [ 'byl ]
(syllabic post-consonantal) ɫ	ɲl	yl	kettle [ 'ketɫ ] → [ 'ketyl ]
r	r	r	red [ 'red ] → [ 'red ]
j	j	j	yes [ 'jes ] → [ 'jes ]
w	w	ł	week [ 'wi:k ] → [ 'łik ]

auditorily the closest one. Technically speaking, following this line of reasoning, we ought to state that the word-final [ð] is to be adequately reflected via a plosive since it is partially-voiced. However, taking the predominant auditory perspective into consideration, one may stipulate that, in the Polish ear, a word-final [ð] does not sound like a plosive at all—it sounds like a fricative. What is more, when a suffix is added, the fricative may eventually become intervocalic.

An additional segment needs to be inserted in the case of [ŋ] as well. Of course, Polish does contain the velar nasal in its phonetic system but the environment in which it is found is divergent. The problem is that, in Polish, the velar nasal is always followed by a homorganic velar plosive, [k] or [g]. Approximating the sound into Polish follows one of the two strategies—inserting an extra segment (i.e. [g]) or removing the velar place of articulation (and turning the the velar nasal into the alveolar nasal). The latter solution appears to result in the considerable loss of phonetic word-final contrast whereas the former one constitutes a typical Polish error, but at the same time preserves the contrast. As before, bearing success in communication in mind, we opt for the former following the logic of choosing, to put it informally, *the lesser of the two evils*.

ring [ˈrɪŋ] → [ˈryŋg] (the former version)

ring [ˈrɪŋ] → [ˈryn] (the latter version)

## 5 Proposal of a Respelling System for Strings of Segments

When considering the possible respelled forms of English segments (both vocalic and consonantal) one should not forget about the fact that, when individual sounds are placed in sequences, they may (and usually to some extent will) influence one another; what is more, the mutual interactions might result in an auditory sensation which is not so much unpredictable as completely divergent from the pronunciations of its individual elements.

Table 3 lists a selection of consonantal (1–5) and mixed (6) sequences of sounds which have been considered distinctive due to the fact that in all the cases the auditory outcome of the string results in a sensation which is distant from the sounding of its individual components. Hence, each item in the table requires separate treatment and analysis. The uniqueness of items 1 and 2 reflects the mutual influence of the plosive and the approximant resulting in the aspiration and shift of the former as well as the affrication and devoicing of the latter (Gimson, 2001). As a result, the auditory dimension of both the English sequences is optimally expressed as strings of a Polish affricate followed by the Polish trill. Points 3 and 6 refer to a sheer simplification of the original English sequence in order to render it easily readable and pronounceable for a Polish user. What is more, in accordance with Sobkowiak's proposal (Sobkowiak, 1997), number 6 makes use of the Polish orthographic string *-eń-* which renders it possible to include nasality and palatality in one symbol. Positions 4 and 5 require an insertion of a segment in order for the

**Table 3** Correspondences between selected English and Polish segmental sequences

number	English string	Polish string	Polish spelling	Exemplary word (English spelling, IPA transcription, Polish respelling)
1	tr (syllable-initial)	tʃr	czr	train [ 'treɪn ] → [ 'czrejɲ ]
2	dr (syllable-initial)	dʒr	dźr	dry [ 'draɪ ] → [ 'dźraj ]
3	ts (syllable-final)	tʃ	c	that's [ 'ðæts ] → [ 'dec ]
4	t̥ (geminate)	t	t	that top [ ðæ'tɒp ] → [ det 'top ]
5	t̚ (unreleased)	t	t	that girl [ ðæ'tgɜ:l̚ ] → [ det 'gyrl ]
6	ɛɪ	ɛɲ	eń	ancient [ 'eɪnʃənt ] → [ 'eńszɨnt ] danger [ 'deɪndʒə ] → [ 'deńdʒe ]
7	fθ	ff	ff	fifth [ 'fɪfθ ] → [ 'fyff ]

strings to be decodable by a Polish listener. Technically speaking, in the majority of the cases, the first instance of the plosive in 4 and 5 ought to be unreleased as it is followed by another plosive. This articulation of the first plosive, however, would render the sound virtually inaudible to a Polish ear. The hypothetical respelled forms might resemble the following:

- (a) that top [ðæ'tɒp] → [de' top]
- (b) that girl [ðæ'tgɜ:l̚] → [de' gyrl]

In this situation, however, the sequences might be decoded as *the top* and *the girl*, respectively. In order to avoid this dangerous semantic shift, an additional [t] segment ought to be inserted into the pronunciation of the sequence to make it more spelling-like, and consequently easier to interpret.

On the other hand, one should be aware of the unquestionable limitations of the method of respelling. Its application runs into serious trouble when dealing with case 7 due to the fact that a sequence of a dental and a labio-dental fricative cannot be satisfactorily reflected in Polish as there are no dental fricatives in this language. A possible solution is to propose a geminate sequence of two labio-dental fricatives; however, Polish users appear to find the string unsuitable for practical use and somewhat *cumbersome*.

## 6 Proposal of a Respelling System for Unstressed/Weakly Stressed Syllables

The presence of the short schwa in unstressed and weakly-stressed positions constitutes a common source of errors for spelling-oriented Polish learners and results in an orthography-based mispronunciation of a word.

**Table 4** Respelled forms of lexemes containing the lexical short schwa in the word-initial (1, 2), word-medial (3, 4), word-final (5, 6) position and in selected weak forms (7, 8, 9)

no.	English lexeme	English pronunciation	Polish pronunciation	Respelled form
1	police	[ pə 'li:s ]	[ pɨ' l'is ]	[ py' lis ]
2	suppose	[ sə 'pəʊz ]	[ sɨ 'pɔwz ]	[ sy 'pɔtʂ ]
3	secretary	[ 'sekɹətəri ]	[ 'sɛkɹifʃɹi ]	[ 'sekɹyczri ]
4	dinosaur	[ 'dɪnəsɔ: ]	[ 'dɛjnɨsɔ ]	[ 'dajnyso ]
5	brother	[ 'brʌðə ]	[ 'brʌvɛ ]	[ 'brawe ]
6	better	[ 'betə ]	[ 'bɛtɛ ]	[ 'bete ]
7	from Poland	[ frəm 'pəʊlənd ]	[ frɨm 'pɔwɨnd ]	[ frym 'pɔɫynd ]
8	for Peter	[ fə 'pi:tə ]	[ fɨ 'pitɛ ]	[ fy 'pite ]
9	of wood	[ əv 'wu:d ]	[ iv 'wɨd ]	[ yw 'tʌd ]

The unstressed syllables in Table 4 have been divided into two types—the intra-word ones, i.e. the syllables which have lost prominence as a result of the rhythmic structure of the word as whole (1–6), and inter-word ones, i.e. the ones which lack stress due to the appearance of weak forms in connected speech (7–9). As can be noticed, respelling proves to be a practical and useful tool which may be used in conducting an approximate Polish-based demonstration of the segmental consequences of converting a stressed syllable into an unstressed one. This way, the appearance of weak forms in connected speech as well as the pronunciation of the short schwa in lexically-unstressed syllables which both constitute challenging and considerably unintuitive phenomena for Polish learners can be successfully explained in a matter of minutes. It ought to be remembered, however, that this kind of explanation is not adequate for a university-level phonetics class but rather an English course the participants of which only use English for communicative purposes.

## 7 Selected Aspects of the Application of Respelling

The method of respelling may be viewed from a variety of angles and its usage appears to have diverse consequence. The first aspect to be mentioned here is the aesthetic, and somewhat psychological, point of view. To a number of teachers, applying the letters of their native tongue may not seem to be sophisticated enough, even intellectually primitive. This approach stems from the conviction that if a teacher presents a letter-based account of a word's approximate pronunciation to his

students, he or she is downgrading his personal phonetic competence and expertise and thus losing respect of the group. The impression one may be under is that, if respelling is taught during an EFL class, the instructor does not have the appropriate command of English phonetics (preferably RP English) and, as a result, he or she is not able to present phonetic transcription to his group of students. In other words, the instructor is utterly incompetent as far as pronunciation teaching is concerned (because he would rather force his/her students to use Polish sounds than teach English phonemes) and obviously ignorant of academically-grounded phonetic transcription (due to the fact that, if the teacher was familiar with it, he would certainly use it during the lesson). However, the impression is wrong for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is always the instructor's responsibility to choose the techniques to be applied during the class. That choice ought to be determined by factors such as the level of teaching, the age of the students, or the purpose of the course. During academic English phonetics classes respelling should not be used (or overused), but it might be a useful method for elementary-level English classes taught to for instance farmers who wish to communicate in English with their business partners (also farmers) from other countries. Secondly, it ought to be understood that respelling is not meant to be phonetically precise, but rather practically helpful. With that view in mind, all the instructor wishes to do is help his students in their unequal struggle with English phonetics; in order to do that, he or she attempts to achieve the maximum pedagogical result using the concrete means that are available to him. For a variety of reasons (some of which have been presented above), the possibility of teaching sophisticated phonetic knowledge to the students may not necessarily be one of them. Thirdly, the claim that respelled forms of English words are primitive, or look primitive, comes from a misunderstanding of the situational context in which they are applied. Utilising orthographic means of one's first language to demonstrate the pronunciation of words in a foreign tongue requires of the instructor both considerable expertise in the phonetic systems of both the codes and a good deal of practically-grounded contrastive approach. In the author of the current publication's modest opinion, the ability to provide clear and sometimes rudimentary approximations of sophisticated phenomena is an indispensable feature of a successful teacher or lecturer. It might be compared to discussing the physical movement of molecules by means of the observation of the behaviour of snooker balls.

Having discussed the aesthetic perspective, let us proceed with the practical aspect of the application of respelling. For the purposes of an EFL class, the technique allows the instructor to explain an approximate pronunciation of a word to his students quickly and efficiently, which renders it a useful and welcome tool in the contemporary competitive EFL market. For instance, demonstrating the appearance of the short schwa in an unstressed syllable might be a time-consuming task as Polish students notoriously base their phonetic judgements on the spelling. In the case of respelling, it takes no more than several minutes to present the approximate pronunciation of a word and explain the influence of the absence of stress on the quality of the vowel. Naturally, in addition to realising the concrete

merits of using letters to reflect sounds, one ought to be aware of the practical limitations of the method.

The most crucial of these limitations refers to, methodologically speaking, *the target audience*. The individuals who might benefit from this approach are usually those who study/use English for everyday communicative purposes, and who are not (and do not wish to be) familiar with phonetic transcription. In other words, our target group consists of elementary-, beginner, and lower-intermediate students of English (Sobkowiak, 1997), participants of specialised English courses (farmers, IT specialists, the white-collar personnel of international corporations, the elderly, etc.) or the users of travel phrasebooks (globetrotters, businessmen travelling abroad, exchange students, etc.). In such situations, what determines the exact form and level of precision of the presented pronunciation should not, strictly speaking, be the teacher's phonetic expertise but rather the down-to-earth communicative necessities and needs of the user/learner. Last but not least, an interesting question relating to the applicability of respelling during an EFL class at the primary school level may be raised. At first sight, one might be tempted to think that primary school children ought not to be exposed to letter-based phonetics as it might result in the fossilised pronunciation of English words and an inability to learn English sounds in the future. However, the reality of teaching English in Polish primary schools is that, in spite of its presence both in the curricula and in the widely available coursebooks, English pronunciation is still considered a topic secondary to grammar and vocabulary. In many schools, English phonetics is not introduced at all due to the fact that the teacher needs to concentrate on those elements which are crucial for basic communication, i.e. words and grammar. What this means is that fossilised pronunciation is very unlikely to develop because the students may actually never have the chance to be exposed to any kind of English phonetics practice in the first place. In other words, the great majority of Polish primary school level children will most probably never be required to learn and use English phonemes in their speech as English phonetics will not be introduced during EFL classes at any level of their education (unless they choose to study at a University English Department where they will be required to attend phonetics classes).

In addition to the above perspectives, the method of respelling may be claimed to perform a facilitative function as well. Firstly, the presentation of phonetics during an EFL lesson is simplified due to the fact that there is no need for the students to be familiar with the IPA. The teacher may use a code which draws directly from the orthography of the group's native tongue. Secondly, the time required to write the pronunciation of a considerable number of words on the board is noticeably shortened in reference to the standard phonetic script. The procedure reduces the time necessary for the group to copy the information into their notebooks as well. Thirdly, respelling allows the participants of the class to practice the material on the board immediately, which renders it ideal for choral repetition or drills. In other words, since the pronunciation on the board contains standard letters only, the students do not need to concentrate on each phonetic symbol trying to interpret it, but rather read the letters at a tempo similar to standard reading.

This way the students see their fast progress, do not become discouraged or frustrated, and hence benefit from this somewhat teacher-centred technique.

The final aspect of the application of respelled forms refers to their interpretation from the point of view of logic. When teaching the pronunciation of a foreign language we never encounter situations during an EFL class in which students leap directly from an utterly incorrect phonetic form to a native speaker's level of pronunciation. The process of learning the phonetics of a foreign tongue involves a fairly large number of stages which appear to be intermediate between the starting phase and the finishing level (which may itself equal native speaker's competence). In other words, phonetic precision does not constitute a binary, i.e. two-valued, phenomenon but rather it resembles a continuum of an infinite number of values ranging from the lowest one to the highest one. Four of those points (two intermediate and two extreme) along the continuum have been included in Table 5.

As can be deduced from Table 5, a respelled form has been presented under number three, i.e. the second intermediate form. The precise understanding of that fact may become clearer in view of the theory introduced by Lofti Zadeh which is known as *fuzzy logic*. According to that approach, the term *fuzzy* denotes one that "[...] cannot be sharply defined [...]" (Nguyen & Walker, 2006, p. 1) and any of the intermediate stages may be characterised by the partial membership to any of the extreme values. Obviously, the kind of membership of interest to us is the extent

**Table 5** Four levels of phonetic precision along the continuum

no.	English lexeme	Polish pronunciation	Respelled form	Explanation
1	water	[ 'vætɛr ]	[ 'vater ]	Spelling-based form; a Polish learner reads the word in exactly the same manner as he/she would read a Polish word; the lowest level of phonetic precision
2	water	[ 'wɔtɛr ]	[ 'toter ]	partly spelling-based form; the learner is aware of the fact that the letter 'w' may sometimes be sounded as [w] and that it is followed by an [o]-like vowel; the first intermediate level
3	water	[ 'wɔtɛ ]	[ 'tote ]	pronunciation-based form; the learner is trying to copy the English sounds by providing their closest auditory Polish equivalents; the second intermediate form
4	water	[ 'wɔ:tə ]	N/A	native speaker's competence; the highest level of phonetic precision

to which a form belongs to item four, i.e. the native speaker's competence. In other words, a respelled form does not only constitute an intermediate stage but also a pronunciation which is compatible with item 4 to a certain degree (in other words, one which partly meets the criteria for being categorised as native). This, in turn, is caused by the fact that phonetic precision is not a binary but a vague concept. It is practically impossible to state whether a phonetic form has precision or not, but it is possible to state that pronunciation A sounds more native-like (that is, has a higher membership-to-item-four value) than pronunciation B. Using Lofti Zadehs words, fuzzy logic is "[...] an imprecise logical system, FL, in which the truth-values are fuzzy subsets of the unit interval with linguistic labels such as *true*, *false*, *not true*, *very true*, *quite true*, *not very true* and *not very false*, etc. [...]" (Zadeh, 1975, p. 407). The author continues to state that "[...] the simplest way of characterizing fuzzy logic is to say that it is a logic of approximate reasoning," whose "[...] distinguishing features are (i) fuzzy truth-values expressed in linguistic terms [...] (ii) imprecise truth tables; and (iii) rules of inference whose validity is approximate rather than exact (Zadeh, 1975, p. 407)." It may be true that our understanding of the technique of respelling is flawed because we tend to forget that phonetic precision is not a binary phenomenon, but a strictly fuzzy concept. A possible theoretical consequence of that new assumption is the fact that item 3 in Table 5 no longer proves to be only a simple sequence of letters reflecting the phonetic shape of an English word but rather it constitutes a formal letter-based attempt at capturing one of the transitional phases between the level of the absence of phonetics and the point at which a learner's pronunciation is native-like. Perhaps this is precisely the perspective that ought to be adopted., i.e. an interpretation of respelling as a step towards a native-like command of phonetics, a technique which enables the student instant access to communicative-level speech. This method allows the instructor to show to his group that communicative-level pronunciation is within their grasp, and, instead of just talking about the language, they will finally be able to use it in everyday situations. Instilling this kind of a sense of achievement which is available here and now into the students may be a powerful motivational tool which proves that success in speaking communicative English may come much sooner than expected.

## 8 Conclusions

The present paper contains an attempt at an objective discussion of the technique of respelling from a variety of different perspectives (logical, aesthetic, methodological, practical, facilitative). These angles appear to indicate that using letters of the native tongue to present the pronunciation of foreign words has both merits and limitations. However, the view advocated here is that respelling constitutes a limited-application instant-access tool which can be successfully used in the teaching



of approximate English pronunciation at levels ranging from beginner's to lower-intermediate. What is more, respelled forms seem to be ideal for phrasebooks due to the fact that a typical user is not interested in native-like pronunciation of English, but rather in a kind of speech that would be easily understandable to other non-native users of English. All in all, respelling appears to be a practical and motivational limited-use low-level pedagogical tool, an answer to the demands of the contemporary EFL teaching. Commercially speaking, it constitutes an instrument enabling schools to demonstrate the attractiveness of studying English (by showing that accomplishing the level of communicative English is within the reach of a student with average cognitive abilities) and remain competitive in the local EFL teaching market.

The author of this paper's favourable opinion on respelling stems from a deep conviction that the ultimate goal for the majority of realistically minded users/learners is not to speak English at the native-like level, but rather to be able to communicate with (non)-native speakers of the language in everyday situations. In other words, respelling may be considered a recommendable L1-sensitive pedagogical tool as long as one remembers that meeting the needs of the user/learner constitutes the central element of the didactic process.

## References

- Cymbalista, P., & Kleparski, G. (2002). Teaching vocabulary inevitably implies teaching pronunciation and hence elements of phonetic transcription (at any level). In G. A. Kleparski (Ed.), *The twists and turns of vocabulary teaching and testing. Papers from the Second British Council Sponsored Symposium held in Chelm in April 2002* (pp. 7-16). Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego.
- Gimson, A. C. (2001). *Gimson's Pronunciation of English. Sixth Edition. Revised by Alan Cruttenden*. London: Arnold.
- Jassem, W. (1973). *Podstawy fonetyki akustycznej*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwa Naukowe.
- Nguyen, H. T., & Walker, E. A. (2006). *A first course in fuzzy logic*. Boca Raton: Chapman and Hall /CRC.
- Sobkowiak, W. (1997). Radically simplified phonetic transcription for Polish speakers. In J. Fisiak, R. Hickey, & S. Puppel (Eds.), *Language history and linguistic modelling. Festschrift for Jacek Fisiak on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday*, (pp. 1801-1830). Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Sobkowiak, W. (2007). This is Tom = /zyzys'tom/. Pronunciation in beginners' EFL textbooks then and now. *Research in Language*, 10(1), 1801-1830.
- Sobkowiak, W. (2012). E-dictionaries and phonolexicographic needs of EFL users. *Lexikos*, 17, 134-151.
- Wiśniewski, M. (1997). *Zarys fonetyki i fonologii współczesnego języka polskiego*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Zadeh, L. (1975). Fuzzy logic and approximate reasoning. *Synthese*, 30, 407-428.