What to Teach and What Not to Teach, Yet Again: On the Elusive Priorities for L2 English Phonetics

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Abstract The author takes stock of the different, sometimes rather emotionally charged, and invariably overlapping, instalments of the discussion about the segmental elements of the English sound system that merit more attention than others. The claims that not everything can be taught in the EFL/ELF classroom, and not all types of deviation from the intended target norm are of equal gravity, are relatively undisputed. What is a matter of continuing debate, however, is how that target is defined and, consequently, which errors matter more than others. The paper will home in on three major types of yardsticks that have been used—or at least proposed—in recent years, or that could serve as benchmarks for evaluation purposes: strength of perceived foreign accent, intelligibility, and broadly understood aesthetic considerations. The overarching criterion of teachability will also be invoked. The aim of the paper is to tentatively identify types of errors that figure prominently in all the above, and consequently point to areas of L2 phonetics that may deserve to be tackled first and foremost. While English dental fricatives and vowels re-emerge in the discussion several times, the overall conclusion is, rather predictably, that matters of pedagogic priorities are far from straightforward, and the discussion is, and promises to be for years to come, ongoing.

1 Introduction

One of the recurrent themes in the field of L2 English phonetics in the past few decades has been the matter of pedagogic priorities. The question of what to teach and what not to teach, while painful and sometimes shameful, will inevitably face

English as a Foreign Language and English as a Lingua Franca, respectively. The terms are by no means interchangeable, but for the purposes of the present paper I do not think it necessary to treat the two learning settings separately.

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even the most devoted of pronunciation instructors: given the enormous difficulty of the task, the multitude of phonetic variables to be practised, and, on the other hand, the limited time that can be devoted to pronunciation teaching at any level, it is clear that being selective in the L2 classroom is a dire necessity. Since teaching priorities are—presumably—determined by the relative salience of pronunciation errors, it seems crucial to examine the criteria that have informed the various interpretations of salience in this context. Consequently, one could attempt to rank the chunks of the English sound system in terms of their relative importance from the point of view of:

(1) Foreign accent criterion, whereby the level of achievement is measured against native speaker norms, and the successful learner is expected to sound as native as possible to the (usually native) listener.
(2) Intelligibility criterion, whereby the accomplished learner is capable of producing L2 English speech that is comprehensible to the (not necessarily native) interlocutor.
(3) Aesthetic/attitudinal considerations, which designate certain pronunciation errors as irritating to the listener.

Somewhat implicit in the previous three is the overarching criterion of teachability: after all, it only seems meaningful to discuss the relative importance of eliminating errors which *can* be eliminated at all through classroom work.

The following sections will look in more detail at the above criteria, with a view to establishing how they interact with each other, how various phonetic variables may be prioritized in each case, and whether some sort of 'common core'—areas that seem to be highlighted by all four sets of measures—could be tentatively proposed. In what I believe to be the research spirit embodied by Professor Sobkowiak's work, reference will frequently be made to empirical data provided by spoken L2 English corpora.

In particular, I will be referring to the Polish Inter-English corpus (PIEC, for short) that formed the basis of my PhD dissertation, supervised by Professor Sobkowiak himself. The corpus, thoroughly discussed in Scheuer (1998), consisted of recorded speech of 13 1st-year students of the School of English (Instytut Filologii Angielskiej) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The data was obtained in two elicitation tasks—text reading and 'free' speech—at two points in time: first, at the very beginning (October 1995), and second, at the very end of the students' first academic year (May 1996). The recordings, whose total length exceeded 2 h, were transcribed phonetically by the present author. In those days, corpus linguistics was a relatively new field of study, the enthusiasm for which was subsequently spread by Professor Sobkowiak to an impressive number of his colleagues and students. A spoken, phonetically transcribed corpus of interlanguage speech was even more of a rarity, which may have made PIEC the first project of this kind in Poland, so I was very proud to present my work-in-progress report at the spiritual ancestor of the Accents conferences in Łódź in April 1996.

Another collection of linguistic data, this time French Inter-English oriented, that I will be making several references to is the tandem corpus that was recently

collected at the University of Paris 3 as part of the SITAF project.[1] The corpus, presented in detail in Horgues and Scheuer (forthcoming) consists of 30 hours' worth of linguistic data obtained from face-to-face conversational exchanges held by 21 pairs of undergraduate students, with each 'tandem' consisting of a native speaker of English and a native speaker of French. The dialogues and reading passages were both audio and video recorded on two occasions separated by a 3-month interval. The data is still in the process of being transcribed, but we hope that in the future it can be explored in a variety of different ways—some of which will allow for multimodal analysis of the interface between the speakers' phonetic, syntactic and gestural behaviour. Since we have recorded actual interaction between native and native speakers, there will be ample opportunity to study instances of communication breakdown, with a view to establishing which types of mispronunciation tend to compromise intelligibility more often than others and which phonetic errors appear to trigger the most corrective feedback from the native partner, even if—or, especially if—they do not impede communication.

2 Foreign Accent Criterion

There are a number of reasons why the foreign accent yardstick—conceptualised as the measure of 'non-nativeness' of one's phonetic output—occupies a special place in the theory and practice of the acquisition of any living second language. In the case of the majority of natural languages, native speaker norm—an idealised concept that it may be in itself—is simply the only norm that could reasonably be posited. Even if matters are considerably more complex in the case of English, especially in the context of its use a lingua franca of the modern world,[2] it is safe to say that traditional reference accents like RP or General American still remain the only standards that can be applied in the L2 English classroom with a fair degree of confidence or consistency, and are at least implicitly associated with recognised forms of certification.

That native competence was the ultimate—if unattainable—goal of any second language learning process, was for long decades regarded as an axiom. When I presented my research into foreign accent assessment at the Teaching FL Phonetics conference in Wąsosze in 2002, it did not even occur to me that my assumptions "that the goal of phonetic training is enabling the learner to pass for a native speaker" and if so, "the highest positions in the hierarchical list of errors should, logically, be occupied by those which make the learner speech *sound* foreign to the listener" (Scheuer, 2003, p. 93) could come to be seriously challenged.

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[1] **S**pécificités des **I**nteractions verbales dans le cadre de **T**andems linguistiques **A**nglais-**F**rançais.

[2] Dziubalska-Kołaczyk and Przedlacka (2005) is just one instalment of the spirited debate over the (in)stability and (in)appropriateness of native speaker norms.

In my accent assessment experiment (discussed in more detail in Scheuer, 2003 and 2007), I elicited foreign accentedness judgements from 3 groups of judges: 5 native Polish and 5 native English teachers at the School of English, UAM Poznań, as well as 5 non-linguistically trained native speakers of Southern British English permanently residing in the UK. The listeners heard short samples of speech extracted from the PIEC corpus, produced by 13 speakers in 2 elicitation tasks (reading and speaking) and were asked to rate them on a 1–5 scale, where '1' stood for 'very strong foreign accent' and '5' for 'no foreign accent at all—definitely native'. The mean score given to the speakers by the 3 sets of judges was 2.23, 2.34 and 2.78, respectively. The relative leniency of the UK-residing judges in comparison with the other two groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.005$).

One of my primary objectives in conducting the study was to glean insights into the ranking of various non-native pronunciations in terms of creating the impression of foreign accent, and as a result—being true to my previously stated principle of what the goal of phonetic training was—to establish the relative importance of eradicating particular types of errors in the course of L2 acquisition. In order to relate the impressionistic evaluations of accent strength to the varying phonetic characteristics of the rated samples, I made reference to the phonetic transcription of the recordings, produced as part of my PhD project (Scheuer, 1998). As the excerpts played to the judges were very short (15–20 s), I was only able to consider a handful of general types of segmental errors in order for the analysis to make any statistical sense. The errors that appeared to be significantly correlated with foreign accent ratings in the case of the UK listeners were:

- 'other' vowel quality errors[3] ($r_s = -0.57$);
- 'non-schwas' in weak syllables[4] ($r_s = -0.51$);
- [i] for /ɪ/ substitution, as in *[ˈhil] for /ˈhɪl/ ($r_s = -0.48$).

While I cannot stress enough that the above hierarchy is very tentative only, it is still remarkable that all three types of errors whose frequency significantly correlated with accentedness scores concern the production of vowels. This finding might have very important pedagogical implications, if one does indeed assume that native speakers' perceptions are of any relevance at all.

Another interesting result of the above experiment regards a proverbial hallmark of a foreign accent in English that is the erroneous rendition of interdental fricatives. Although the error ranked first in the Polish judges' hierarchy ($r_s = -0.56$), the UK listeners seemed to be relatively immune to this acoustic cue (correlation $r_s = -0.15$, non-significant), meaning that the frequency of 'non-ths' in the phonetic

[3] 'Other' in the sense of being different from the ones covered by the two remaining vocalic categories.

[4] This error certainly encroaches upon the suprasegmental domain, but it can still be argued that in the case of Polish learners of English there is a vital segmental aspect to it. Transfer of L1 fast speech rhythmic patterns may lead to the reduction of the vowel in terms of quantity, but not necessarily quality, i.e. the resultant centralization of the sound cannot be taken for granted (cf. Sobkowiak, 1996).

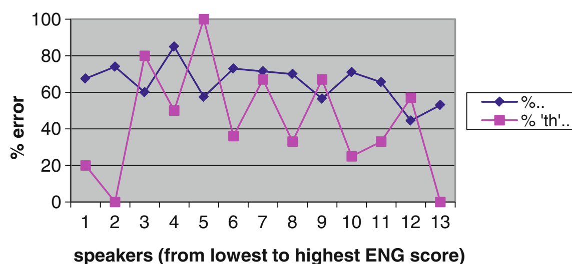

Fig. 1 Mean vowel error versus mean 'th' error in individual speakers (adapted from Scheuer, 2007)

output did not seem to make much difference to their judgments of foreignness. It is worth noting that Brennan and Brennan (1981) found a similar lack of correlation between the frequency of 'non-ths' and the mean accentedness score in their classic study of Spanish-accented L2 English speech.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relative (in)significance of vocalic and interdental errors to the strength foreign accent, as perceived by the UK judges. The speakers were arranged in accordance with their mean accentedness score (from lowest to highest, i.e. from the strongest to the weakest perceived foreign accent). One can notice the general tendency for speakers with weaker foreign accent to be characterised by fewer vocalic errors (i.e. the 'vowel error' curve slopes slightly down towards the right edge of the graph), whereas the distribution of interdental errors seems to be rather random in this respect (the shape of the 'th error' curve displays no visible pattern, as a function of accent strength).

Impressionistic measurements of foreign accent are naturally beset with a host of different problems: they are transient and subjective, heavily dependent on the type of listener as well as the particular experimental setting, and, on top of everything else, there is no reliable way of knowing what the listeners are *really* basing their judgements on. Although, as pointed out by Markham (1997, p. 97f), the listener is an "inherently subjective, and demonstrably inconstant source of information", (s)he still remains "the only truly linguistic measure" in this matter, which means that foreign accent is bound to remain an elusive criterion for determining pedagogic priorities. Nevertheless, however it is defined and measured, foreign accent is not normally regarded as a possession to be prized. Unfortunate and unfounded as such opinions may be, native and non-native listeners associate certain types of non-target pronunciations evident in L2[5] speech with specific—usually negatively judged—personality traits or lower intelligence. To quote but a few examples of research that found such evaluative assessments: the previously mentioned classic study by Brennan and Brennan (1981) showed that as the level of perceived accentedness increased from speaker to speaker, the naive judges awarded

[5] The phenomenon is certainly not limited to L2 speech (c.f. classic studies like Giles, 1970), but evaluative reactions to L1 accents lie outside the scope of this paper.

significantly lower status ratings. My own study (Scheuer, 2005a) suggested a correlation between degree of the speaker's foreign accent and the listener's irritation. More recently, Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) demonstrated how the speakers' foreign accentedness adversely affected their credibility, in that statements spoken by a non-native speaker were judged to be less true than when spoken by a native speaker.

It is safe to say that native speakers and their norms have been getting a lot of bad press in the past 20 years, although perhaps not considerably so in Poland. Branded as irrelevant and over-judgemental, L1 English speakers are increasingly being refused the right to provide standards for English as an International Language (EIL), which belongs to *all* its users (McKay, 2002, p. 126), who therefore have every right to resist "the hegemony of the language by appropriating it for their own purposes" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 33). I do not even wish to attempt to summarise the, sometimes very heated, discussion about EFL/ELF standards that we have witnessed in recent years. However, I believe it was Professor Sobkowiak who actually introduced the Polish Anglicist community at large to the works of Jennifer Jenkins, a leading exponent of the ELF-ish paradigm, which most of us initially treated with disbelief more than anything else. His 2002 Wąsosze presentation (Sobkowiak, 2003) inspired countless papers, publications and workshops that promptly followed.

The 'new' approach advocates a thorough revision of phonetics syllabi away from admiration for, and imposition of, native speaker accents, which "are not only sociolinguistically inappropriate for communication in which NSs are rarely involved, but also psycholinguistically and socio-psychologically unachievable for the majority of adolescent or adult learners" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 36). What is put forward as the most appropriate criterion for EIL pronunciation is mutual intelligibility, which prompts Jenkins (e.g., 2000, 2007) to propose a minimal set of features claimed to be essential to safeguarding international communication, known as the Lingua Franca Core (LFC).

3 Intelligibility Criterion

Understood as a feature of speech that enables the hearer to recognise words/utterances at the phonetic level (e.g., Andreasson, 1994), intelligibility hardly requires vindication as a factor in gauging the relative gravity of L2 pronunciation errors. After all, the primary function of language is communication, and if that is jeopardised, one is more than justified in trying to eliminate the source of the problem before moving on to higher-level considerations like sounding aesthetically pleasing to the listener. Therefore, if pronunciation instruction had to be limited to a bare minimum, intelligibility seems to be a reasonable, if again elusive, bottom-line criterion to adopt when selecting the phonetic features to be taught.

Rather confusingly, unintelligibility in L2 speech is often conceptualised as a simple concomitant of the speaker's foreign accent. Difficult as it may be to

dissociate the two notions completely, they are certainly not synonymous, and the relationship between foreign accent and intelligibility is complex and not straightforwardly implicational. In other words, if someone is unintelligible, this does not necessarily imply a foreign accent (they may be emulating an unfamiliar *regional* dialect), and conversely, a foreign accent does not always render the speaker unintelligible: numerous examples of proficient non-native speakers of English suffice to demonstrate that one can be perfectly intelligible and still sound noticeably foreign. Also, while it is reasonable to assume that intelligibility decreases as foreign accent increases, the reverse may not necessarily be true, in view of studies suggesting that certain features of native (even standard) speech make the speaker harder to understand for the uninitiated listener (e.g., the use of weak forms is labelled "unhelpful to intelligibility" in Jenkins, 2007, p. 24). That last observation points to another complicating factor in dissecting intelligibility—just like with foreign accent, whether a given word/utterance is or is not recognizable will to a large extent depend on the listener, rather than on the objectively measurable features of the speaker's phonetic output. Here one could mention the listener's proficiency level, their familiarity with a particular accent, and even their willingness to understand the speaker (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998, p. 4).

A logical extension of the assertion that foreign accent and unintelligibility do not always go hand in hand is the conclusion that non-native pronunciations and pronunciations leading to unintelligibility do not necessarily coincide. However, the latter will, for the most part, be just a subset of those signalling foreignness to the listener. Every experienced language learner would certainly agree that there is a world of difference between reaching a level of competence that makes you fairly intelligible (at least to proficient listeners) and managing to eradicate traces of your specific L1 accent, let alone sounding completely like a native speaker.

While it can be argued that any mispronunciation has the capacity for miscommunication (e.g., Beebe, 1987), one naturally expects mistakes that result in actual or potential lexical confusion to rank higher in this hierarchy than simple non-native productions. In the context of the present discussion, this could be paraphrased by stating that what the teacher should attend to in the first place is phonemic contrasts and minimal pairs, tailored to the needs of a particular L1 learner population. That conclusion, however, does not simplify the daunting task at hand in any substantial way and does not aid the teacher in the inescapable selection process. Jenkins's LFC model comes to the teacher's rescue by designating vowel (unlike consonant) quality as a non-core feature, i.e. one that does not seem to jeopardise international intelligibility, provided that L2 consistent regional qualities are used (e.g., 2007, p. 24). Whether qualitative distinctions are indeed predominantly communicatively redundant in L2 English speech is certainly disputable: one could quote numerous examples of how the distortion of a vowel's identity causes—or at least substantially contributes to—genuine lack of understanding, some of which are discussed in Horgues and Scheuer (forthcoming). If vowel quality turned out, indeed, to be primarily redundant, it would serve as a classic example of a phonetic feature that—if distorted—has enormous potential for producing foreign accent without adversely affecting communication. On the other hand, lack of unstressed vowel reduction

represents a slightly different case, as far as the relationship between the two criteria is concerned. It is reasonable to assume that maintaining vowel contrasts in unstressed syllables should promote intelligibility, as the underlying spelling remains fairly transparent, thus making words easier for international listeners to recognize. This, however, is in conflict with attempts at sounding native, since 'non-schwas' turn out to be major contributors to foreign accent.

Where intelligibility-oriented proposals like the LFC seem to concur with the foreign accent narrative is on the matter of interdental fricatives. As the findings reported in Sect. 2 suggested, 'non-th's do not tend to strengthen the impression of foreignness, at least in the case of native listeners. At the same time, they are considered to be non-core features, which do not normally compromise intelligibility. This assertion finds further support in the study of the corrective feedback attested in the SITAF corpus, presented in detail in Horgues and Scheuer (forthcoming). Various native English speakers, although correcting their partners' erroneous renditions of 'th's, made a point of stressing that those did not in any way impede their understanding of what was being said—something that I will return to in the following section.

4 Aesthetic and Attitudinal Considerations

The statement that different (mis)pronunciations may prompt different reactions on the part of the listener is a platitude. While certain types of phonetic deviation from the norm may be regarded as 'cute' or even 'extremely charming',[6] others will, sadly, be branded as unpleasant or even irritating. Since causing annoyance is hardly ever what learners aim to achieve through their L2 pronunciation, it stands to reason that eliminating errors that produce that effect may also be high on the agenda. Here, however, one stumbles upon the difficult question of how to determine what is irritating to the listener? It definitely must not be regarded as a simple concomitant of unintelligibility, as evidenced by substitutions of [z] for English < th >, regarded as annoying by fellow non-native speakers, although totally inconsequential to intelligibility (Jenkins 2000, p. 138). In a similar vein, Markham (1997, p. 101) observed—although in the context of L2 Swedish—that "[c]uriously, the more negatively judged errors are ones which do not cause lexical confusion /…/—they are simply non-native pronunciations –, whereas the more acceptable errors can cause lexical confusion."

Just like the factors discussed in the earlier sections of the paper, irritability is a highly subjective feature. It varies therefore not only with the linguistic background of the listener, but also with his/her attitude—informed by national or racial prejudice—towards specific L2 accents identified (not necessarily correctly) through

[6] These were indeed some of the adjectives used by native English contributors to the SITAF corpus when asked to describe French-accented English in general.

specific L1-induced pronunciation features. This is aptly illustrated by Cunningham-Andersson's (1997) investigation of the assessment of friendliness and intelligence of a group of immigrants covering a wide spectrum of native languages, made on the basis of their L2 Swedish accent. Listener judgements made it clear that "overall differences between speakers, such as voice characteristics, accent strength and believed ethnic origin of the speaker are more important than the particular type of non-native pronunciation used" (1997, p. 142). On the other hand, her study did reveal that certain non-native pronunciations carry more severe social stigmatisation than others: for example, erroneous voicing of fortis consonants sounded unfriendly, whereas speakers with a tendency towards [ŋ] for /n/ substitution were considered less intelligent than others.

To return to the more familiar L2 English context, let us revisit the old favourites—the dental fricatives. In view of the fact that their erroneous renditions do not tend to markedly influence accentedness scores, coupled with assertions that those errors are inconsequential to intelligibility, the English 'th's can hardly claim to be priority candidates for teaching, as the added bonus resulting from their mastery seems to be rather insignificant. However, quite predictably, there is more to the /ð/ than meets the eye. The preliminary analysis of the corrective feedback in the SITAF corpus shows that failure to produce dental fricatives was among the errors that most of our native speakers were not ready to ignore, even though—by their own admission—intelligibility was not at stake. One is thus justified in hypothesising that we are dealing with an irritating, rather than communicatively detrimental, error. Sometimes the correction took the form of a mini-speech, as was the case with the speaker who commented on his French partner's renditions of < th > as [s] in the following way: "'North', with a 'th' at the end. That's probably a tricky one, but, really, get the /θ/: 'north' /…/ Again, I completely understood you, but /…/". In the same spirit, although as if speaking on behalf of native English speakers in general, another participant reassured his partner as follows: "The only suggestion that I could make for you was the /θ/ sound /…/ I mean I… we could completely unders I'm sure… I could completely understand you, and everyone else could, but… erm… instead of [zi] it's /ˈðiː/".

It is worth noting that both the above instances of corrective feedback were triggered by the [s]-[z] for /θ/-/ð/ substitution, which reinforces the idea that this kind of error is indeed annoying to the listener and should perhaps come to the fore in the L2 phonetics teaching hierarchy. Further support for this claim was provided by the answers to the questionnaires that the tandem project participants were asked to fill in after the final recording session (Horgues & Scheuer, forthcoming). Eight of our 21 NS participants singled out 'th'-s as particularly problematic in the case of French-accented English, while 4 of them went as far as branding this type of mistake as "annoying without necessarily hindering comprehension". On the other hand, six participants considered English vowels as being especially challenging for the French learners, or frequently mispronounced by them in an irritating way. While 'vowels' is admittedly too general a label to be of immense practical value of itself, some comments clearly referred to lack of distinction—or simply confusion—

between short and long sounds.[7] Such remarks certainly strike close to home. A number of recent studies have shown Polish speakers of English to be insufficiently attentive to L2 vowel duration contrasts, both in perception and production (e.g., Waniek-Klimczak, 2005; Rojczyk, 2010). That, in turn, highlights the fact that there is indeed much more to the mastery of English vowels than the qualitative distinctions—something that is perhaps underestimated in the Polish EFL/ELF classroom and something that pronunciation instructors may also want to bear in mind when deciding on teaching priorities.

5 Teachability

Perhaps surprisingly, teachability is relatively seldom invoked in discussions about pedagogic priorities. This may be due to the fact that L2 theorists and practitioners are likely to feel rather uncomfortable with the idea that certain elements of L2 grammar are 'unteachable' and therefore resistant to their instructional efforts. The notion of teachability—in the sense that learning follows teaching—is also one of the pillars of the LFC paradigm, in that "there seems to be a one-to-one correspondence between the *relevant* (items essential for EIL intelligibility) and the *realistic* (items which are teachable), and between the *irrelevant* and the *unrealistic*" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 165f; original italics). One cannot help having the impression that this line of reasoning vastly oversimplifies the picture. As Sobkowiak (2005, p. 140) points out, "[t]he belief that English pronunciation is both unteachable and unlearnable, because it is too difficult, spreads like wildfire among the supporters of LFC". Understood in the above sense, the 'teachable versus unteachable' distinction would seem to remove a substantial burden of responsibility from the teachers of phonetics: they face an easy task in the case of the 'relevant' areas (students are highly motivated themselves and learn without difficulty), whereas in the case of the 'irrelevant' they may spare themselves the vain effort involved in engaging in a task that is anyway doomed to failure. Another problem with thus defined 'unteachability' is that of verification: it is generally much more difficult, if not impossible, to prove that something does *not* exist than the reverse. Even if learning does not follow teaching in an immediate and spectacular way, didactic endeavours may bear fruit at a later stage of language acquisition: by means of sensitizing the learner to certain articulatory/auditory nuances, the teaching process is likely to lay the ground for the learning process that leads to improved performance accuracy over time.

A number of recent studies of phonetic behaviour of Polish students of English demonstrate that items that could be regarded as unteachable (by virtue of being

[7] Considering the phonetic output previously produced by their French partners, however, one can speculate that at least some of those remarks regarded failure to produce diphthongs, e.g. 'take' being rendered as *[ˈtɛk].

'irrelevant' to intelligibility) do respond to pedagogic treatment, even if that response is not as robust as one might have wished. For example, both Nowacka (2010) and Lipińska (2013) found gradual improvement in their subjects' performance on the /æ/ vowel, whose exact quality certainly represents a considerable challenge to the Polish learner. On the whole, Nowacka's comprehensive study reported improvement on 66 % of the consonantal and 50 % of the vocalic features she investigated. Interestingly though, she observes that "there is a substantial dependence between the phonetic syllabus and the students' progress. This means that what improved in the first place was the pronunciation of consonants, then of vowels, and, finally of suprasegmentals, in agreement with the order in which these issues were taught" (2010, p. 255). To paraphrase it in an optimistic way, we may conclude that what is teachable is what is actually taught (what is taught becomes teachable), and the longer an item is taught the better the chances of success.

On another optimistic note, one of the reassuring findings of the analysis of the PIEC corpus from the teachability perspective (presented in Scheuer, 2005b) was that the students' handling of the 'th's ('irrelevant' features) did improve over the course of 8 months separating the two recording sessions. However, the progress was statistically significant ($p < 0.005$) only for the 'reading' as well as the two tasks lumped together, but not for 'speaking' considered alone, even though the raw figures did point to a change in the right direction. Another problem highlighted by the study was the subjects' performance on the /iː/ vs /ɪ/ distinction, which—if one adopts the 'relevant = teachable' equation—should show every sign of teachability, but which Nowacka's (2010) study designates as resistant to change. My analysis revealed that things were far from straightforward. Although the frequency of [i] for /ɪ/ substitutions fell by a quarter in 'reading' (from 38.7 % in October to 28.6 % in May), it considerably rose in 'speaking'—from 31.6 % in October to 34.1 % in May, i.e., by as much as 8 % (2-way ANOVA, interaction effect significant at $p < 0.01$). This combined improvement/deterioration pattern is rather intriguing, and—although it does not imply that any of the above phonetic variables are unteachable—it goes to show that certain areas of L2 English sound system may require more vigilance than others. The '*[ˈhil] for /ˈhɪl/' type of error is, demonstrably, Polish students' Achilles' heel: a problem which may actually get worse even though the overall L2 fluency and phonetic performance improves.

6 Conclusions

By way of introduction to the conclusion, I may reiterate that "contrary to what might be inferred from the title of the paper, the author certainly does not wish to claim that there are, in fact, areas of English phonetics that are not worth teaching at all" (Scheuer, 2003, p. 98). Sadly, not everything can be taught within the limited amount of time that is usually available, which means that teachers invariably do find themselves making choices. That is not to say, however, that these choices are made in accordance with any consistent selection policy, or even consciously at all.

Leaving aside the obvious dichotomy between 'what do we teach' and 'what should we teach' (e.g., Schwartz, 2005), we must not ignore such down-to-earth reasons behind teachers' choices like personal convictions, personal preferences and personal habits. Very frequently the choices will already have been made for the teacher before Lesson 1 even begins—as a function of what the workbook says, what the syllabus says, and, crucially, the way the students are going to be evaluated (if at all) at the end of the learning cycle.

By way of final conclusion the author wishes to observe that most, if not all, of the questions raised in the context of pedagogic priorities in the past 20 years are as valid today as they once were: the dilemma over what to teach and what not to teach, whichever of the elusive selection criteria one decides to adopt, is not likely to be resolved any time soon.

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