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Prosody Learning Strategies and What English Philology Students Know about Them

Abstract. Although learning strategies are in the focus of attention of both theorists and foreign language teachers, only few scientific descriptions highlight the significance of the prosodic skills and strategies to practice them. This paper discusses the results of the questionnaire the aim of which was to determine English philology students' understanding of prosody and prosodic skills as well as to identify prosodic strategies they use to improve their pronunciation in English. We can conclude that students understand prosodic phenomenon of language but they cannot define it, and they apply a variety of activities that develop prosodic skills.

Keywords: learning strategies, suprasegmentals, prosodic skills, students' assessment

Introduction

As Mennen (2007:52) observes in her description devoted to the phonetic and phonological influences in non-native intonation, "Just as poor pronunciation can make a foreign language learner very difficult to understand, poor prosodic and intonational skills can have an equally devastating effect on communication and can make conversation frustrating and unpleasant for both learners and their listeners". Hence the constant need to propose, describe, discuss, and implement learning strategies that develop learners' prosodic competence.

Although research on strategies used to improve pronunciation has been conducted for almost two decades (Celce-Murcia et al. 1996, Peterson 2000, Vitanova and Miller 2002, Eckstein 2007, Wrembel 2008, Pawlak 2010, Derwing and Rossiter 2002, Sardegna 2011), only a few scientific descriptions highlight the significance of prosodic skills and refer directly to improving the suprasegmental (prosodic) component. One of the first attempts to investigate prosody learning strategies was made by Cruz-Ferreira (1999) who, in a report on the negative transfer of prosodic patterns in multilingual children's speech, simply asserted their application in the process of language acquisition. From the results of Osburne's (2003) survey designed in order to identify learning strategies used by L2 learners, eight different categories of pronunciation learning, with a focus on prosodic structures as one of them, were identified. The purpose of another experiment – Ingels' (2011) research – was to evaluate the effectiveness of adult L2 learners' use of strategies for suprasegmental features: message unit (intonation group) boundaries, primary phrase stress (utterance stress), intonation, reduction of unstressed vowels in content words and function words, linking, word stress, and multiword construction stress. Finally, in the most recent publication (Romero-Trillo ed. 2012), the authors' attention is focused on a wide scope of prosodic issues in reference to the learning process, such as early prosodic production, prosodic adaptation in foreign/second language learning, teaching prosody with a pragmatic orientation, prosody, and feedback.

In light of the above observations, it can be argued that there is still much to examine in the field of prosody learning. Such questions as to how students (learners) understand/define and diagnose prosody learning strategies (techniques), what strategies they use (what actions they employ) in an effort to practice and to master specific prosodic skills, whether they implement the techniques consciously or subconsciously, and many others still remain unresolved.

The aim of the research

The present study has been motivated not only by the lack of comprehensive analysis of prosodic phenomenon from the learning/teaching perspective discussed above, but also by several more prosaic observations.

To begin with, even though linguistic research propagates correctness and compliance with prescribed rules, more and more (non-) native speakers use language in a slovenly fashion, simplifying the content and sound of everyday speech in the same way as they abbreviate SMS text messages and e-mail messages, which results in language impoverishment. Next, we can often observe teachers' apparent reluctance to teach pronunciation on the suprasegmental level despite the fact that they are provided with a variety of modern manuals containing a prosodic component. Furthermore, first year English philology students (who have not yet achieved any credit in practical phonetics) perform well and sound better than did students of a decade ago, which is clearly observable. They belong to a generation who has many more opportunities to travel, to be exposed to living language in English-speaking countries, and to communicate in English in their own country via the Internet, TV and radio channels. Nonetheless, their phonetic skills are (near) native-like when the pronunciation of segmental components is taken into account – but there is still much to be done as far as the suprasegmental level is concerned.

In view of the abovementioned facts, the authors of the article set the following purposes:

1. to determine if and how English philology students understand prosody and prosodic skills,
2. to investigate English philology students' degree of awareness in their use of prosodic strategies,
3. to identify the range, type, and frequency of the prosodic strategies they use.

Subjects and instrument

A study on whether third year B.A. English Philology students of the University of Białystok, Poland understand and apply suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies was carried out on a group of 50 respondents. All students had completed courses on practical and theoretical phonetics so they were expected to be familiar with the phenomenon of suprasegmental phonetics at the time of their participation in the research.

The instrument – a questionnaire – consisted of 12 questions, the majority of which were of a structured type (in the form of a list or scale) though there were a few verbal questions as well (Bell 2009: 137-138).

Data collected

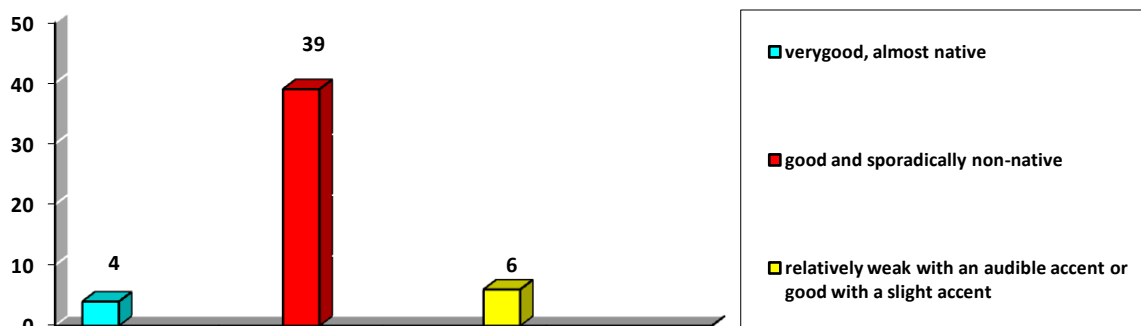
The results gathered are presented below. Thus, in reference to the first question of the questionnaire 43 respondents assessed their competence as EFL users of phonetics (the quality of their pronunciation skills in the target language) as good and sporadically non-native, 4 participants evaluated their competence as very good, almost native, 2 as relatively weak with an audible accent and 1 as good with a slight accent. The results are illustrated in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Students' assessment of their phonetic skills in the target language



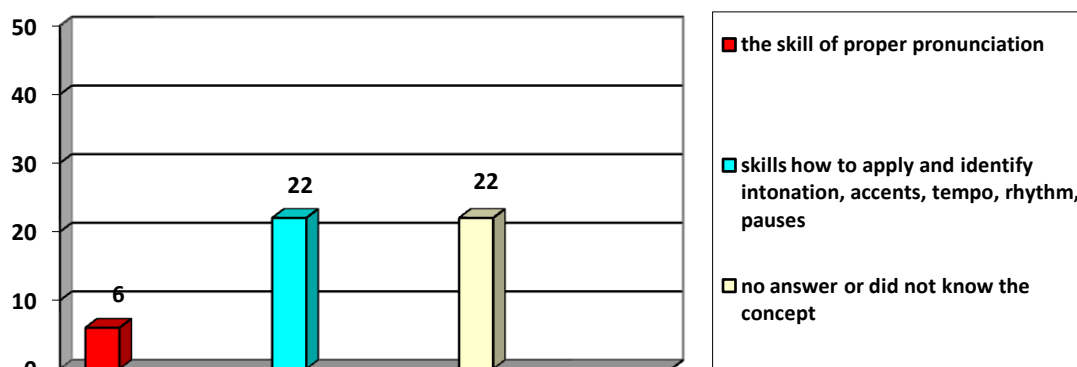
When asked about their pronunciation skills at the suprasegmental level, respondents assessed their abilities as follows: 4 declared them to be very good, almost native, 39 believed them to be good and sporadically non-native, 6 relatively weak with an audible accent and good with a slight accent. The results are illustrated in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Students' assessment of their pronunciation skills at the suprasegmental level



When asked to define in their own words the concept of 'prosodic skills', students proved to understand it as: the skill of proper pronunciation (6 respondents), skills how to apply and identify intonation, accents, tempo, rhythm, and pauses (22 respondents), or either wrote no answer or declared not to know the concept (22 respondents). These results are illustrated in Diagram 3.

Diagram 3. Definition of 'prosodic skills' according to students



When we asked students to assess their abilities in reference to their phonetic sub-skills they provided the answers that are gathered in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' assessment of their phonetic sub-skills

Phonetic sub-skills declared by respondents	Number of respondents declared they:		
	definitely possessed	could not decide	did not possess
	particular skill		
I am good at pronouncing individual sounds.	36	8	6
I am good at pronouncing individual words.	36	6	8
I locate pauses correctly.	30	14	6
I am good at pronouncing individual sounds, I mainly make mistakes at the word stress level.	25	19	6
I divide sentences into intonation groups properly.	32	11	7
I pronounce difficult sound clusters correctly.	22	22	6
I locate and pronounce sentence stress correctly.	30	13	7
I stress individual words correctly.	25	9	16
I understand the contrastive function of sentence stress.	25	13	12
I recognize the contrastive function of sentence stress.	24	14	12
I can apply the contrastive function of sentence stress.	20	17	13
I stress words and simultaneously pronounce weak and strong forms correctly.	24	20	6
My utterances are correct in respect to rhythmic organization. I can divide sentences into rhythmic groups.	26	14	10
I apply word linking properly.	29	10	11
I recognize and properly pronounce falling terminal tones.	24	16	10
I recognize and pronounce falling-rising terminal tones properly.	25	17	9
I recognize and pronounce rising terminal tones properly.	24	15	10

I recognize and pronounce rising-falling terminal tones properly.	26	15	9
I pronounce weak and strong forms properly.	25	15	10
My main problem is an incorrect usage of intonation patterns related to sentence type (statement, general or specific question, command, etc.	16	10	24
I cannot apply emotional tones according to emotions a given utterance expresses (surprise, hesitation, approval/acceptance, doubt/reserve, etc.).	13	10	27

All 50 respondents, when asked whether they thought that prosodic skills could be improved, were fully convinced that such progress was possible to be achieved. When asked what they did to improve their prosodic skills, 17 students gave no answer or suggested they did nothing, 12 said that they watched films and TV programmes to improve their prosodic skills, 11 respondents declared they repeated the model pattern. Listening to English speech was indicated by 3 respondents, similarly reading aloud, talking to natives, self-recording, or exercising in front of a mirror were indicated, each respectively by 3 students. 2 students said they did transcription, while each of the following answers was highlighted by 1 respondent: diction and singing classes, repetition of tongue twisters, singing English songs, or going to the target language country. The answers are collected in Table 2.

Table 2. Strategies declared by students to be used by them to improve their prosodic skills

Strategies used by students:	Number of respondents:
no answer (or did nothing)	17
watching films and TV programmes	12
repetition of the model pattern	11
listening to English speech	3
reading aloud	3
talking to native speakers	3
self-recording	3
exercising in front of a mirror	3
doing transcription	2
diction and singing classes	1
repetition of tongue twisters	1
singing English songs	1
going to the target language country	1

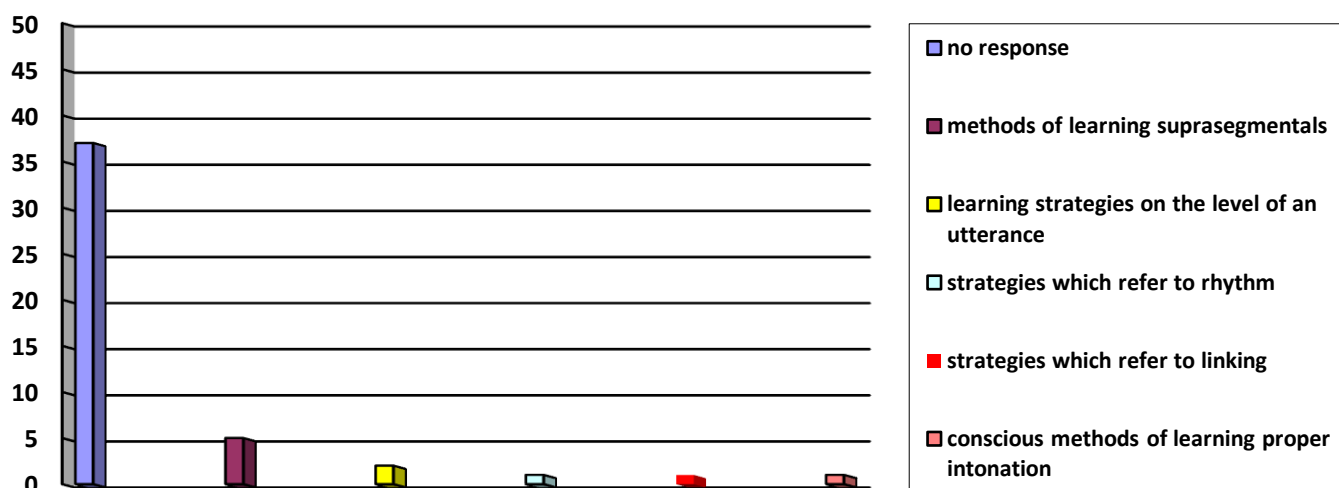
In reference to the question whether students, at the time of their study at the University, came across the concept of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies, 12 respondents confirmed that they had, 36 declared that they had not, and 2 respondents refused to answer the question at all. Their answers are gathered in Diagram 4.

Diagram 4. Students' experience with the concept of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies



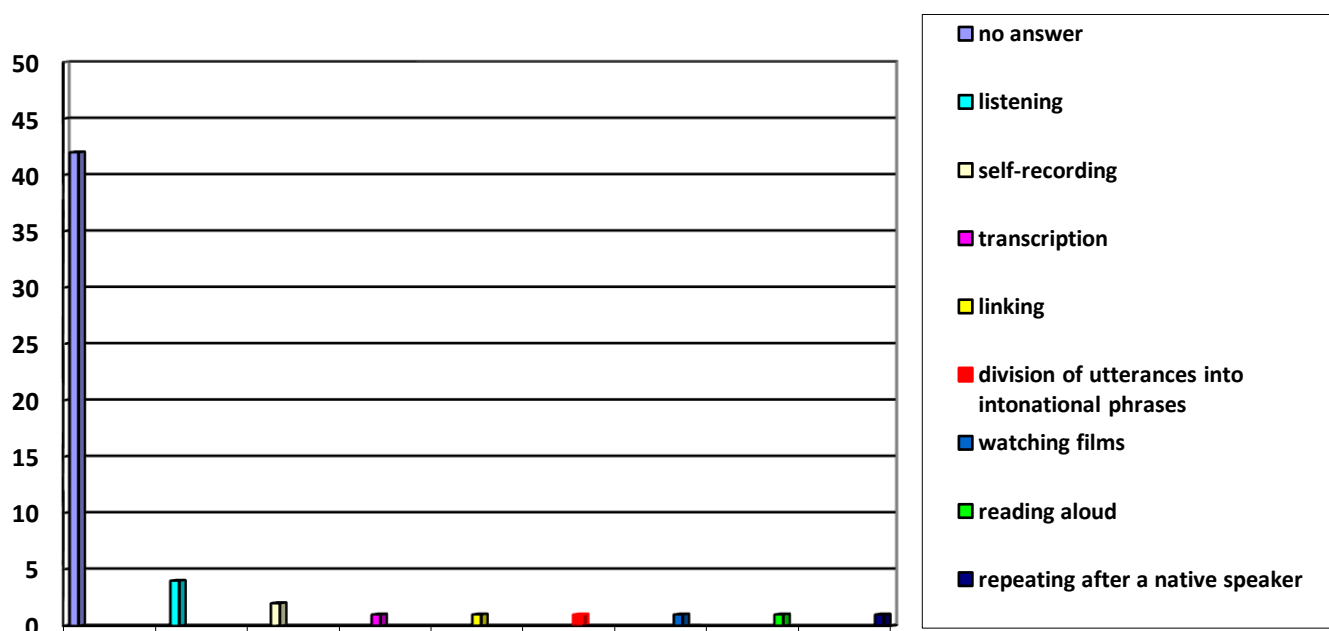
When requested to define suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies, 37 respondents provided no answer. Others understood them as methods of learning suprasegmentals (5 students) or learning strategies on the level of an utterance (2 students). For 2 students suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies refer to the rhythms or strategies which refer to linking, or to conscious methods of learning proper intonation (1 student). These results are illustrated in Diagram 5.

Diagram 5. Students' understanding of the concept of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies



42 respondents could not give any examples of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies, 4 students said that listening was an example of such strategies, self-recording was indicated by 2 respondents. The remaining examples were suggested each by 1 respondent: transcription, linking, division of utterances into intonational phrases, watching films, reading aloud, repeating after a native speaker. The answers are collected in Diagram 6.

Diagram 6. Examples of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies as understood by students



Students when requested to share their view on the usefulness of different types of behaviour in the process of development of their prosodic skills in the target language declared as follows (cf. Table 3).

Table 3. Students' view on the impact of different types of behaviour upon their prosodic skill development

Type of behaviour or strategy:	Number of respondents who declared the influence of a particular behaviour upon one's prosodic skill development as:		
	positive	neutral	negative
Good suprasegmental phonetics can be accomplished by students who produce the greatest amount of utterances.	27	15	8
Good suprasegmental phonetics can be accomplished by students who get feedback on what was correct or incorrect in their utterances.	26	16	8
Prosodic errors should definitely be corrected by the teacher.	32	14	4
Students should listen to different speakers of the language if they are to achieve good pronunciation at the suprasegmental level.	35	9	6
Students should know the segmental features of the target language if they are to have good pronunciation at the suprasegmental level.	27	16	7
Students can accomplish good phonetics at the suprasegmental level only in a stress-free setting.	27	12	11
Suprasegmental phonetics cannot be mastered in a classroom setting, even if errors are corrected.	20	16	14

Students who are weak at suprasegmental phonetics can increase their skills by doing exercises on their own at home.	26	12	12
Students who are weak at suprasegmental phonetics can increase their skills by doing suprasegmental transcription exercises on their own.	25	15	10
Students who have poor suprasegmental pronunciation can increase their skills by listening to authentic recordings (radio, TV).	37	7	6
Students who have poor suprasegmental pronunciation can increase their skills by repeating recorded utterances.	34	6	10
Students who have poor prosodic skills can increase them by themselves by doing exercises that aim at tone recognition and identification.	23	18	9
Students who have poor prosodic skills can increase their abilities by doing exercises that aim at division into intonation and rhythm groups.	24	17	9
Students who have poor prosodic skills can increase their abilities by doing exercises on their own that aim at locating main sentence stress in utterances in various contexts.	23	18	9

When asked about which activities they regard as strategies of learning phonetics and which of the strategies indicated they had applied in their learning process, the following results were obtained (cf. Table 4).

Table 4. Activities considered by students as phonetics learning strategies and amount of respondents who use them in life

List of activities (phonetics learning strategies to be chosen from)	Number of respondents who consider them to be phonetics learning strategies	Number of respondents who claim to apply them in real life
Learning new words together with their pronunciation, e.g. by checking pronunciation in a dictionary	48	42
Repeating words aloud after the teacher (especially when they are new or difficult to pronounce)	35	34
Conscious listening to recordings, paying attention to the pronunciation of words, phrases, rhythm and tone of utterances	44	39
Speaking aloud so that the pronunciation of sounds, words and the intonation of utterances can be heard	37	37
Recording and listening to one's own utterances, monitoring the quality of one's own pronunciation in the target language	41	20
Using phonetic transcription not only during lessons but also by transcribing words or text on one's own	34	25

Motivating oneself to talk in the target language (assuring oneself about having good pronunciation)	31	30
Taking risks, or a lack of fear of making pronunciation errors or of not having perfect pronunciation	32	26
Believing in one's success as an FL learner	27	27
Conscious avoidance of sounds and intonation patterns typical of one's native language	15	15
Convincing oneself that proper pronunciation enables communication in a foreign language	20	21
Monitoring the quality of one's own utterances, their phonetic correctness at the sound and word stress level	38	31
Monitoring the quality of one's own utterances, their phonetic correctness at the rhythmic and intonation level	33	28
Conscious elimination of one's own individual (idiosyncratic) features	24	20
Motivating oneself to do self-run exercises that aim at practising proper pronunciation	32	27
Doing exercises that aim at identifying incorrect phonetic forms or doing error correction exercises	33	17
Conscious division of utterances into intonation groups	20	14
Doing self-run exercises focused at pronouncing each intonation group with a proper stress (accent)	25	12
Paying attention to weak and strong forms and applying them consciously in speech	31	16
Conscious practice of linking	24	16
Being attentive to pauses, practising them by numerous repetitions of the same fragments	29	20
Trying to recognize correct and incorrect forms in the utterances of other speakers	27	28
Taking any opportunity of using the language for communication with native and non-native speakers (trying to practise one's own pronunciation)	35	27
Repeating the same form many times	27	26

so that the most native-like model is remembered		
Monitoring the quality of one's own speech, their phonetic correctness at the sound and word stress level	34	29
Monitoring the quality of one's own speech, and their phonetic correctness at the level of rhythm and proper intonation model	34	25
Paying attention to changes in a communicative unit that result from the intonation of a speaker (analysing one's own utterances and the speech of others)	24	26
Guessing the communicative function of one's own utterances by interpreting its intonation pattern and different sentence stresses	21	22
Asking the teacher as soon as doubts concerning the target language phonetics (pronunciation) appear	38	30
Self-assessment of one's own speech in reference to their phonetic correctness	33	31

Conclusions

Having reviewed the most significant findings of the questionnaire, perhaps the most astonishing conclusion is that although almost 86 percent of students assessed their segmental and suprasegmental phonetic skills as (very) good and only sporadically non-native, only 44 per cent of them understand the concept of prosodic skills. When asked to define prosodic skills, students find them either hard to define or tend to understand them as skills how to apply intonation, accent, tempo, rhythm and pauses. Although students declare that they possess such sub-skills as dividing sentences into intonation groups and rhythmic units correctly, locating sentence stress and pauses properly, and applying native intonation patterns, they consider them prosodic skills, but do not refer to them as suprasegmental phonetics. This may indicate that they do not understand that prosodic skills and suprasegmental phonetics are synonymous terms as well as that they associate phonetic skills with the ability to articulate correctly only foreign sounds and their clusters. It is not surprising in the light of another conclusion that 72 percent of participants have never come across the idea of suprasegmental phonetics learning strategies and as few as 6 percent of respondents associate them with learning speech rhythms, linking, and intonation. What is more, when asked to name phonetic strategies that they consciously use, students cannot name any, or indicate two main techniques: watching TV (and films), and repetition of model patterns. Simultaneously, and surprisingly with regard to the philology training they have received, they seem to disregard the corrective value of using phonetic transcription as a strategy.

The facts noted above are reflected in the list of phonetics learning activities students claim to apply in real life. These include, among other points, conscious listening to recordings; paying attention to the pronunciation of words and phrases; the rhythm and tone of utterances; speaking aloud so that the pronunciation of sounds, words, and intonation of utterances can be heard; monitoring the quality of their own utterances; their phonetic correctness at the rhythmic and intonation level; doing self-run exercises focused on pronouncing each intonation group with the proper stress (accent).

Generally speaking, although students understand the prosodic phenomenon of language, they cannot define it. They have not come across the concept of prosody learning strategies, but rather apply activities that develop prosodic skills. They study and practice English prosody during their practical phonetics laboratory but, sadly, our experience shows that they are afraid of prosody, and they think it is waste of time.

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