"West" or "Vest"? Pronunciation of English Consonants [w] and [v] in the Utterances of Slovak EFL Speakers

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The paper investigates the pronunciation of the labiodental fricative [v] and the labial-velar approximant [w] in the word-initial position in English utterances by Slovak speakers. The objective of the study is to explore which of the two consonants appear to be more problematic for Slovak learners of English. 40 students from a Slovak university produced spontaneous monologues in English, which were recorded using a computer and a standard microphone. Afterwards, two native English speakers conducted a subjective auditory analysis in an attempt to identify errors in the subjects' pronunciation. The results demonstrate that Slovak learners of English frequently encounter difficulties in pronouncing the two consonants, sometimes substituting [v] for [w] and vice versa. The data obtained indicate that the subjects were beset with problems mispronouncing the two sounds to almost the same degree. Possible causes of the erroneous pronunciation seem to involve native language interference, devoting extra effort to approach authentic English pronunciation, and the neglect of pronunciation instruction.

Keywords: consonant [w], consonant [v], phoneme substitution, Slovak EFL learners, English pronunciation

Estimates suggest that approximately one third of the world's population is represented by speakers of English (Crystal, 2008a). This international language is used as a lingua franca among learners from different nations who have studied English as a foreign language (McKenzie, 2010). Thus, English also plays a leading role with regard to foreign language teaching in Slovakia (Bírová & Eliášová, 2014).

Besides other language systems and skills, it appears that English pronunciation represents perhaps the most difficult and puzzling aspect of English for L2 learners. Both segmental and suprasegmental features contain possible pitfalls that foreign language learners need to avoid if they wish to communicate effectively and successfully.

As far as individual sounds are concerned, phoneme substitutions constitute a major source of erroneous pronunciation, which may lead to intelligibility problems (Munro, 2008; Cruttenden, 2014). Replacing certain sounds with others may be caused by the nonexistence of a particular phoneme in an L2 (Zampini, 2008). Furthermore, paying insufficient attention to problematic sounds by both teachers and learners, especially at learners' younger ages, may also produce an undesirable effect on one's pronunciation.

This study attempts to shed more light on the issue of replacing the labiodental fricative [v] with the labial-velar approximant [w] and vice versa in word-initial positions by examining the pronunciation of the two consonants in utterances produced by Slovak university students. For the purposes of this study, two native English speakers were asked to perform an auditory analysis of the recorded utterances.

Differences between Slovak and English pronunciation

Slovak pronunciation is rather different from its English counterpart, and Slovak learners of English encounter difficulties in English pronunciation for several reasons. Firstly, there is a more direct relationship between grapheme-phoneme correspondence in the Slovak language when compared to English. Next, differences are recognized in terms of the phonemic inventories of the two languages. Thus, counterparts of certain phonemes do not exist in one of the two segmental systems. Finally, it is rather interesting to also contrast Slovak prosodic features with the ones in English since noticeable differences can be detected in suprasegmental phonology of the two languages as well (Ábel – Sabol, 1989; Roach, 2009).

Consonantal differences between [w] and [v]

Some consonants can be found both in English and

Slovak phonemic inventories such as the labial-velar plosives [p], [b]. On the other hand, certain consonants can only be found in one of the two languages (the Slovak language does not, for instance, contain the dental fricatives [ð], [θ], and the Slovak nasal [ň] does not exist in the consonantal system of the English language). In connection with this, Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin (2010) emphasize that it is vital to recognize which phonemes and which phonemic contrasts have a tendency to cause problems for L2 learners.

As far as [v] and [w] are concerned, the English labiodental fricative [v] has a counterpart in Slovak, but the labial-velar approximant [w] does not.

Consonant [v]

The consonant [v] is a labiodental fricative; it is realized when the lower lip touches the edge of the upper teeth and friction is produced. The contact varies in accordance with the adjacent sound (Crystal, 2008b; Cruttenden, 2014).

Consonant [w]

The consonant [w] is known as labial-velar approximant in English and is fairly similar to vowel [ʊ] (phonetically, [w] is similar to a vowel sound), except that the lips are more rounded in comparison to the vowel [ʊ]. Cruttenden (2014) advises foreign learners of English not to replace [w] with a voiced labiodental fricative sound [v] (as in German or Slovak). Gorozny, Sahakyan & Wokurek (2001) explain that German speakers have difficulties when pronouncing [w] since this consonant does not exists in modern German. They often replace [w] with [v] in words like *workforce*. Moreover, German speakers sometimes tend to replace [v] with [w]. This is called hypercorrection, e.g. [veri wel] is often mispronounced as [weri wel]. The occurrence of [w] to [v] is 2.9%, and the occurrence of [v] to [w] is 1.0%. Thus, it is vitally important that L2 learners protrude and round their lips, making certain that the teeth do not play any part in the articulation of [w] so that this sound is not replaced by [v].

Although the consonant [w] does not exist in the Slovak subsystem of consonants, it is not difficult to learn the appropriate pronunciation of this sound. However, Bázlik & Miškovičová (2012) indicate that Slovak learners of English often ignore the difference between [v] and [w] and vice versa, using [w] instead of [v] (hypercorrection). Thus, words such as *very* [ˈveri] or *veteran* [ˈvetərən] are sometimes mispronounced as *[ˈweri] or *[ˈwetərən].

It is apparent that improper differentiation between the phonemes [v] and [w] may negatively affect intelligibility. Therefore, substituting [v] for [w] and vice versa could hinder communication as different words are unconsciously pronounced by L2 learners: *vet* [vet] – *wet* [wet], *vine* [vaɪn] – *wine* [waɪn], *vow* [vaʊ] – *wow* [waʊ], etc.

Intelligibility problems

Several studies have indicated that many of the intelligibility issues foreign language learners face result from phoneme substitutions. They tend to replace sounds that are absent from their L1 with the sounds that are close (closest) to the L2 sounds in terms of the place of articulation (O'Connor, 1981; Carter & Nunan, 2001; Gondová, 2012; Hornáčková-Klapicová, 2012; Hassan, 2014; Bui, 2016). Similarly, Munro (2008) and Zampini (2008) claim that pronunciation intelligibility is frequently hampered by the mispronunciation of segmentals. Therefore, it is apparent that pronunciation on a segmental level is also of great importance.

Szpyra-Kozlowska (2015) identifies three types of pronunciation errors for L2 speakers: errors which lead to intelligibility breakdowns, errors leading to amusement or irritation, and errors which result in few such reactions and could even remain unnoticed. The first type of error is of the highest significance because without intelligible pronunciation, communication breakdowns occur. The second type has also proven important – when listeners are irritated or amused, they may be distracted from following the message and the ease of communication is hampered. The third type does not appear to be of considerable significance from the point of view of communicative language teaching (unless L2 learners themselves aim to achieve a native-like accent).

Taking the substitution of one member of a minimal pair for another into account (e. g. vet [vet] for wet [wet]), it seems that this phenomenon also influences intelligibility. Minimal pair substitution typically leads to communication breakdowns if the following conditions are met: both words belong to the same part of speech, both are likely to appear in the same linguistic context, and both are semantically plausible (Levis & Cortes, 2008).

According to Munro (2011), intelligibility is considered the most important aspect of communication. Clearly, no communication is possible when there is no intelligibility. Therefore, pronunciation deviations that negatively influence intelligibility and hinder communication ought to receive meticulous attention by both learners and teachers.

Method

Study

The study concerns the erroneous pronunciation of the consonants [v] and [w] in the English pronunciation of Slovak university students of English. The objective of the study is to find out the extent to which the

learners mispronounce the labiodental fricative [v] and the labial-velar approximant [w], and which of the two sounds poses more problems for the subjects. Furthermore, the causes of erroneous pronunciation are indicated in order to provide more information on why these errors might have occurred.

Participants

The subjects comprised 40 Slovak university students of Teaching English Language and Literature - 34 females and 6 males. Their level of English was B2 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). They were chosen randomly from a Slovak university. On average, they were 21 years of age. The native tongue of all the subjects was Slovak, and they had been studying English for more than eight years. Their pronunciation was recorded using a computer and a standard microphone. Afterwards, the audio files were listened to and analyzed by two independent assessors.

Assessors

Two native speakers of American English were selected to perform an auditory analysis of the recordings. The first assessor (A1) was a male of 25 years of age, and the second assessor (A2) was a female who was also 25 years old. Both of them had already completed phonetic training with regard to English pronunciation prior to conducting their analyses.

Procedure

The subjects were asked to deliver a spontaneous two-minute speech on a topic of their choice. They were not given any time for preparation in order to preserve authenticity. A computer and a standard microphone were used for recording the utterances. After that, the recordings were sent to the assessors for the analyses.

Before analyzing the recorded material, the assessors were instructed to try to report any inappropriate, incorrect, or strange aspects of the subjects' pronunciation. If possible, they should give concrete examples from the recordings. The assessors were not given any suggestions about the focus of the study so that they could possibly carry out an authentic auditory analysis. Finally, the obtained data were examined and processed.
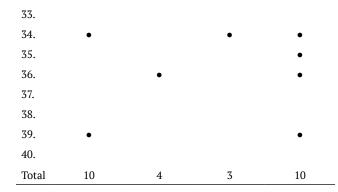
Results and Discussion

Table 1 demonstrates the subjects' mispronunciations of [v] and [w] in the initial positions of words (other segmental and suprasegmental errors identified by both assessors are not included in the table since they were not the focus of this study).

The erroneous pronunciation of the subjects, which was recorded by the assessors (A1 and A2), is represented by a black dot. The labiodental fricative [v] was always replaced with the labial-velar approximant [w] and vice versa.

Table 1
Mispronunciation of consonants [v] and [w]

	A1		A2	
	[v]	[w]	[v]	[w]
1.				
2.				•
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.		•		
8.				
9.				
10.				
11.				
12.				
13.				•
14.	•			•
15.	•			•
16.	•			•
17.	•			
18.				
19.	•			
20.	•			
21.				•
22.		•		
23.				
24.				
25.	•		•	
26.	•		•	
27.				
28.				
29.		•		
30.				
31.				
32.				

33.				
34.	●		●	●
35.				●
36.		●		●
37.				
38.				
39.	●			●
40.				
Total	10	4	3	10

According to the first assessor, 10 subjects mispronounced the consonant [v]. As far as the labial-velar approximant [w] is concerned, the data obtained from the auditory analysis of the first assessor show that four subjects pronounced the labial-velar approximant inappropriately. The data retrieved from the analysis of the second assessor revealed that the consonant [v] was mispronounced by three subjects and the consonant [w] by 10 of them.

Examples which demonstrate the substitution of [v] for [w] include words like *visit* [ˈvɪzɪt], *village* [ˈvɪlɪdʒ], *video* [ˈvɪdiəʊ], *very* [ˈveri], and *victory* [ˈvɪktəri]. These words were erroneously pronounced as *visit* *[ˈwɪzɪt], *village* *[ˈwɪlɪdʒ], *video* *[ˈwɪdiəʊ], *very* *[ˈweri], and *victory* *[ˈwɪktəri].

On the other hand, examples which illustrate the substitution of [w] for [v] involve words such as *what* [wɒt], *week* [wiːk], *watch* [wɒtʃ], *well* [wel], and *world* [wɜːld]. These were mispronounced as *what* *[vɒt], *week* *[viːk], *watch* *[vɒtʃ], *well* *[vel], and *world* *[vɜːld].

An analysis of the results in percentage terms indicates the following. Assessor 1 recognized that 25% of the subjects had problems with [v] and 10% with [w]. On the other hand, assessor 2 observed that 8% of the subjects mispronounced [v] and 25% pronounced [w] inappropriately.

According to the first assessor, the labiodental fricative [v], which also exists in Slovak, was mispronounced more frequently (10 occurrences) than the labial-velar approximant [w] (four instances), which does not have a counterpart in the Slovak language. Therefore, this could be regarded as an interesting finding since a sound that is included in the consonantal subsystems of both languages obviously caused more difficulty to the subjects.

Contrary to assessor 1, the data gathered from the second assessor indicate that the pronunciation of the labial-velar approximant [w] caused more problems to the subjects in comparison to the labiodental fricative [v]. Thus, a sound which only exists in one of the two consonantal subsystems proved to be more complicated, and this is supported by the findings of numerous studies.

Despite the fact that auditory analyses of the two assessors differed to a substantial degree, it is apparent that the consonants [v] and [w] represent a source of difficulties when it comes to phoneme substitution errors.

The study reveals that mispronouncing [w] as [v] occurred nearly as frequently as replacing [v] with [w]. The first instance might arise from language interference. Sinha et al. (2009) claim that the native tongue interferes with the acquisition of a target language. This is also applicable to pronunciation acquisition per se. Slovak learners of English do not have [w] in their L1 phonemic inventory. Therefore, it is highly likely that the absence of this consonant interferes with English pronunciation, and results in mispronouncing the labial-velar approximant [w].

The latter instance raises a rather vexing question since it might be difficult to clarify why the consonant [v], which exists in both languages, is replaced by the consonant [w], which only exists in the English language. Cruttenden (2014) indicates that such a substitution happens because some L2 learners simply tend to use the same consonant ([w]) for both [v] and [w]. Apart from hypercorrection, this could also be explained by the so-called interlanguage process of generalization (Selinker 1972). On the other hand, Bázlik & Miškovičová (2012) suggest that replacing [v] with [w] takes place because L2 learners regard the labial-velar approximant [w] as a more significant representative of authentic English pronunciation. Finally, pronunciation instructors paying scant attention to pronouncing the sounds properly may also occupy a significant role.

Different auditory analysis results demonstrate the individuality of English native speaker assessment with regard to the perception of segmental features produced by Slovak learners of English. Undoubtedly, a study which would employ a larger number of assessors would definitely prove useful when exploring how English native speakers perceive L2 English pronunciation on a segmental level as inter-rater reliability would increase. Nonetheless, in spite of different auditory analysis results delivered by the assessors, it appears that Slovak learners of English encounter difficulties regarding the pronunciation of the consonants [v] and [w]. Apparently, both teachers and learners have to tackle the formidable challenge of paying scrupulous attention to English segmentals, especially to those that do not have counterparts in the learners' mother tongue.

Conclusion

This study aimed at examining the pronunciation of word-initial [v] and [w] in the English pronunciation of

Slovak university students. Assessors' analyses clearly indicated that the subjects encountered problems when pronouncing both sounds in word-initial positions. The first assessor recognized 10 instances of substituting [v] for [w] and four cases of replacing [w] with [v]. Conversely, the second assessor identified three substitutions of [v] for [w] and 10 substitutions of [w] for [v]. Taking the analyses into account, it seems that both consonants pose problems for L2 learners to the same degree.

Substituting [w] for [v] is a well-known occurrence in the English pronunciation of Slovak learners of English. They typically use the labiodental fricative [v] instead of the labial-velar approximant since the latter does not exist in their native tongue. However, replacing [v] for [w] raises a more challenging question since providing a correct answer may be a rather difficult task. Perhaps the learners simply do not differentiate between [v] and [w], or they regard using [w] per se as a sign of "more" authentic English pronunciation. Furthermore, paying closer attention to teaching pronunciation, particularly to phonemes that do not exist in the L2, would conceivably prove more useful.

Conspicuously, phoneme substitution is a critical issue regarding L2 pronunciation. Both teachers and learners need to focus on this matter since erroneous pronunciation on a segmental level can lead to intelligibility problems, and communication is not possible when there is no intelligibility.

Further studies need to be conducted in this field on a wider sample of subjects, employing a larger number of assessors, or using speech analysis. This would definitely enrich the research into the Slovak-English substitution of [v] for [w] and vice versa. Furthermore, extending the analysis to medial and final-word positions as well as exploring other consonantal substitutions would also be beneficial to applied language studies.

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