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# Acquiring L3: don't you sound L2-like?

Przyswajanie J3: czy nie słycać za dużo J2?

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## Abstract

For the last two decades, second language pronunciation has been in the centre of interest of numerous scholars, also in Poland. Although it was underestimated for many years, it has finally been noticed and valued, especially after the series of conferences devoted to accent studies and teaching pronunciation held in Łódź in the 1990s and then in Płock and Konin (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008) as well as subsequent phonetic conferences. Since then, numerous studies have been conducted focusing mainly on L2 learners' achievements in L2 pronunciation at different learning levels (e.g. Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Wrembel, 2002; Nowacka, 2003; Porzuczek, 2002; Wysocka, 2003). A considerable amount of research has also been done in the field of teachers' and students' views and attitudes to pronunciation teaching and learning (e.g., Majer, 2002; Nowacka, 2008; Sobkowiak, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Waniek-Klimczak, 2002; Wrembel, 2002).

The aim of this paper is to examine the attitudes towards learning English pronunciation by various groups of Polish learners of English, as well as to check whether these attitudes have changed in comparison to the previous studies carried out in this field. It is also supposed to test whether these attitudes change with the level of proficiency in ESL/EFL and the amount of formal instruction in English phonetics

and phonology. Four groups of learners are compared in this study. They were recruited among high school and university students at different levels of proficiency in English. All groups of study participants filled in the specially designed questionnaires, containing various questions concerning students' attitudes to English pronunciation, the perceived importance of correct pronunciation in ESL/EFL, evaluation of phonetic classes they attended, etc. The results suggest that learners' attitudes and motivation change with the level of proficiency in English and that the amount of undergone course in English phonetics and phonology is an important factor influencing learners' success in the acquisition of correct L2 pronunciation.

Key words: L2 acquisition, L2 pronunciation, learners' attitudes towards L2 pronunciation.

### Abstrakt

Pomimo iż wymowa w języku obcym/drugim przez wiele lat była niedoceniana i uważana za mało wartościowy element tego języka, przez ostatnie dwie dekady znalazła się ona w centrum uwagi lingwistów i skupiła na sobie liczne badania. Również w Polsce cykliczne konferencje poświęcone fonetyce języków obcych zwróciły szczególną uwagę badaczy na to zjawisko i zaowocowały wieloma badaniami i artykułami dotyczącymi nie tylko sukcesów i porażek uczących się angielskiego w tej kwestii (np. Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Wrembel, 2002; Nowacka, 2003; Porzuczek, 2002; Wysocka, 2003), ale również stosunkiem do nauki wymowy języka drugiego wyrażanym przez nauczycieli oraz uczniów (np. Majer, 2002; Nowacka, 2008; Sobkowiak, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Waniek-Klimczak, 2002; Wrembel, 2002).

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie jaki stosunek do nauki wymowy języka angielskiego mają różne grupy uczących się tego języka jako języka drugiego/obcego oraz czy poglądy w tej kwestii zmieniły się w porównaniu do tych opisanych w poprzednich badaniach na ten temat. Kolejnymi czynnikami, które zostały zbadane to biegłość w języku

angielskim oraz liczba godzin odbytego kursu fonetyki praktycznej tego języka i ich wpływ na postrzeganie ważności poprawnej wymowy w J2.

Cztery grupy uczących się języka angielskiego wzięły udział w badaniu. Zostały one wybrane spośród uczniów szkół średnich oraz studentów filologii angielskiej i różniły się biegłością językową oraz znajomością wymowy języka angielskiego. Wszystkie grupy wypełniły specjalnie zaprojektowany do tego badania kwestionariusz. Otrzymane wyniki sugerują, że stosunek do wymowy w języku drugim zmienia się wraz z biegłością językową oraz że odbyty kurs fonetyki praktycznej ma duży wpływ na tę kwestię.

Słowa kluczowe: przyswajanie J2, wymowa w J2, stosunek do wymowy w J2.

## Introduction

Without any doubt second language acquisition is a very interdisciplinary field, tightly related to copious areas of study such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology, sociology, sociolinguistics, education, etc. (Gass and Selinker, 2008) and comprises acquisition of various skills. Among them, one certainly ought to mention acquisition of L2 pronunciation. Although previously neglected and underestimated as an element of minor importance in second language acquisition, L2 pronunciation has finally become the centre of interest of numerous scholars, for the last two decades also in Poland. It might have happened thanks to the cyclical conferences focusing on accent studies and teaching pronunciation, which were held in Łódź in the 1990s and then in Płock and Konin (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008) as well as subsequent phonetic conferences.

Now it is easy to find a lot of studies concerning L2 learners' achievements in L2 pronunciation at different learning levels (e.g. Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Wrembel, 2002; Nowacka, 2003; Porzuczek, 2002; Wysocka, 2003) focusing both on language learners' speech production (e.g. Porzuczek, 2010; Rojczyk, 2010a; Rojczyk, 2010b) as well as speech perception (e.g. Porzuczek, 1998; Rojczyk, 2008; Rojczyk, 2010b). Also teachers' and students' views and attitudes to pronunciation teaching

and learning have already been assessed by some scholars (e.g., Majer, 2002; Nowacka, 2008; Sobkowiak, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska, et al., 2002; Waniek-Klimczak, 2002; Wrembel, 2002).

However, the latter group of research did not provide scholars with optimistic results. They proved that both ESL/EFL teachers and learners were characterized by a low phonetic competence and that L2 classes lacked the practice of correct English pronunciation. As Szpyra—Kozłowska (2008) noticed, the importance of phonodidactics seems to be still neglected in most Polish schools, where grammar and vocabulary are regarded as the most important aspects of language teaching/learning. Also the quality of pronunciation teaching (lack of classes devoted to the subject, teachers' incorrect pronunciation or low level of pronunciation importance at the examinations) is frequently and widely criticised by the specialists in this field (Porzuczek, 2002; Szpyra-Kozłowska et al., 2002; Majer, 2002; Wysocka, 2003). Moreover, this situation can be perceived as an effect of a low priority of pronunciation skills in various language examinations, such as Polish Matura (the school leaving exam), American TOEFL and Cambridge ESOL examinations (Waniek-Klimczak and Dłutek, 2003; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2003). It is typical that in all of the aforementioned exams, communication skills are thought to be the most important elements (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008). As Nowacka (2003) observed, school graduates do not usually find correct pronunciation an important aspect of language and are mostly characterised by a low phonetic competence. What is more, L2 teachers frequently argue that there is a lack of proper resources useful in pronunciation teaching. This, however, does not seem to be a problem anymore. The number of available materials is constantly growing and various strategies and techniques of effective pronunciation teaching have already appeared and have received great attention among Polish researches (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008).

Low phonetic competence, however, does not seem to be only a characteristic of students, but also of numerous L2 teachers (Waniek-Klimczak, 2006). For instance, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2008) in her paper summarised and contrasted her two previous studies (conducted in

2000 and 2007) in which she had analysed the level of English classes in various Polish high schools, as well as the level of competence of English teachers from these very schools. The results of both studies showed that there was no single class devoted to English pronunciation and only very few lessons contained elements of any pronunciation exercises. What is more, the students from those schools observed that their teachers did not pay attention to learners' pronunciation in L2, claimed that pronunciation was not an important part of language learning and often used a pseudo-phonetic transcription (e.g. the word *a nurse* was transcribed by teachers as /e ners/ or *a fire-fighter* as a /e fajje-fajte/). Moreover, the teachers' pronunciation was described by their students as "full of errors", too (it included e.g. incorrect vowel length, final devoicing of obstruents, etc.). It could be stated that low phonetic competence of teachers and the lack of classes devoted to second language pronunciation certainly contributed to students' low phonetic competence in L2.

#### The aim of the study

The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes towards learning English pronunciation by various groups of Polish learners of English, and to check whether these attitudes, as well as the overall status of pronunciation teaching in Polish schools, have changed in comparison to the previous studies carried out in this field (summarised by e.g. Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008). The study was also supposed to test whether these attitudes change with the level of proficiency in ESL and the amount of formal instruction in English phonetics and phonology. What is more, also teachers' pronunciation, teaching techniques applied by them and lessons content were assessed.

#### Study participants

There were four groups of L2 learners compared in this study. They varied in terms of the schools and programmes they attended, the level of proficiency in ESL and the level of prospective formal instruction in English phonetics and phonology. Group One and Group Two consisted of high

school students, attending the two top-ranked high schools in the city of Sosnowiec, Poland. Group One was recruited from high school students attending third classes of non-linguistic profiles (so called “Maths+IT” and “Biology+Chemistry”) in their schools. They were 18 years old. In the group there were 70 subjects — 24 males and 46 females. Group Two consisted of high school students attending first, second and third classes of bilingual Polish-English profiles in their schools. This group was recruited from all levels of high school education since bilingual programme groups are very small and there are only a few students in each of them. These study participants ranged between 16 and 18 years old (mean: 16.9). There were 32 subjects — females only. Group Three was recruited from first-year students of English Philology at the University of Silesia, who had just begun their university course in English phonetics and phonology. There were 84 subjects — 33 males and 51 females. They were 18-28 years old (mean: 20.3) and had never studied any philology before. The last group of informants, Group Four, consisted of third-year students of English Philology recruited at the University of Silesia, who had just completed their university course in English phonetics and phonology. They were between 21 and 25 years old (mean: 21.5). In the group there were 80 study participants — 17 males and 63 females.

### Procedure

All groups of study participants were given specially designed questionnaires, containing various questions concerning: students’ attitudes to learning English pronunciation, the perceived importance of correct pronunciation in ESL, self-evaluation of their pronunciation, evaluation of phonetic classes they attended, evaluation of their teachers’ pronunciation in ESL, etc. There were two versions of the questionnaire — one for high school students and another for university students. The questionnaires were in Polish to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding caused by the use of learners’ second language. The main part of the questionnaires included a group of statements. The students had to mark the statements using a 7-point Likert scale with the response options: (*Definitely true*) 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 (*Not at all true*). Then they had to answer a gro-

up of open-ended questions focused on subjects' opinions and comments. In some of them, the answers do not sum to 100% as informants could choose or write more than one answer. Moreover, the subjects were free to comment on any question they wanted. The completed questionnaires were collected by the author of this paper, and the answers were analyzed and changed into statistical data.

## Results

Below, the analysis of the selected questions is presented. Not all statements included in the questionnaire can be found in this paper because of their considerable size.

### Group One and Group Two

*What are the most important elements of second language learning?*

<b>Group One</b>	
vocabulary	63%
grammar	46%
pronunciation	23%
other*	14%
conversations/ speaking	11%

Table 1.

The most important elements of SLA according to Group One.

<b>Group Two</b>	
vocabulary	56%
pronunciation	44%
grammar	31%
other*	25%
conversations/ speaking	19%

Table 2.

The most important elements of SLA according to Group Two

\* "other" included various answers rated less than 5% each

As one can see, in both groups vocabulary and grammar are perceived as very important elements of second language one should learn (in both cases they were rated very high). However, surprisingly, a lot of subjects (especially in Group Two — bilingual high school class profile) mentioned also pronunciation as an element that does count.

*What must one learn to communicate in L2?*

<b>Group One</b>	
vocabulary	71%
grammar	43%
pronunciation	26%
other*	17%

Table 3.

What one must learn to communicate in L2 according to Group One.

<b>Group Two</b>	
vocabulary	75%
grammar	50%
pronunciation	31%
other*	13%

Table 4.

What one must learn to communicate in L2 according to Group Two

\* "other" included various answers rated less than 5% each

In the case of this question, again, most subjects chose vocabulary and grammar. But pronunciation was the third most popular skill mentioned by the informants.

Correct pronunciation in L2 is important. How far do you agree with this statement?

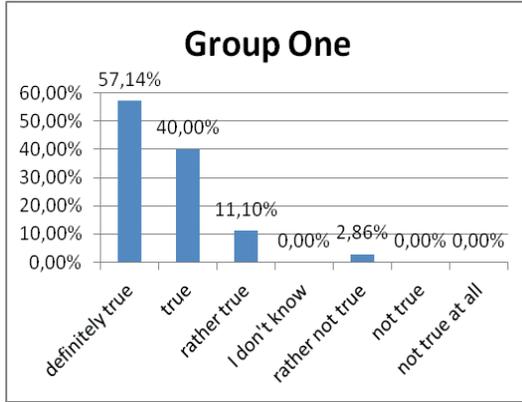


Figure 1.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group One

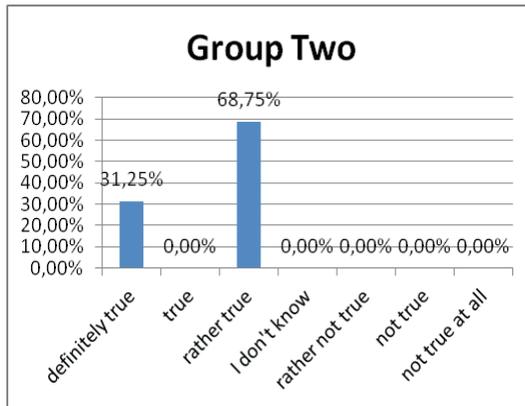


Figure 2.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Two

This question shows that L2 learners are language-aware. They know that correct pronunciation in L2 is important and without it one cannot communicate properly. Most of them commented that correct pronunciation in L2 is vital in order to be understood by others and to understand what other speakers say. Without it, one can say something which they did not mean to say at all. They can confuse similar words. However, what was

striking was the fact that most subjects from Group Two chose the answer “rather true” which could suggest they were not as sure in this matter as subjects from Group One.

*My teacher's pronunciation in English is correct. How far do you agree with this statement?*

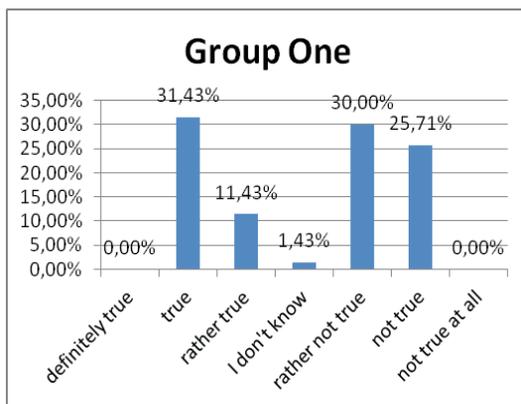


Figure 3.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group One

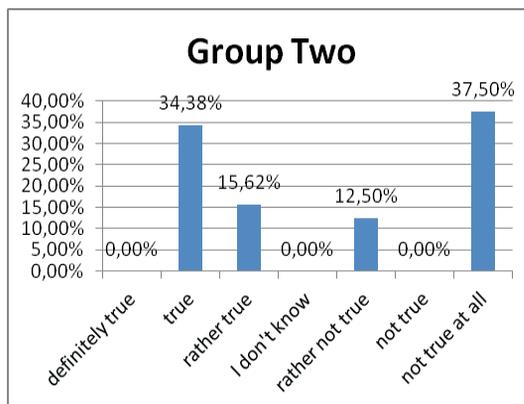


Figure 4.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Two

Although quite numerous study participants agreed that their teachers' pronunciation is correct ("true" and "rather true"), even more of them were very critical in this matter and did not find their teachers' pronunciation to be correct. This is not a very optimistic signal, especially as all teachers whose students participated in this study, hold their MA degree. Students commented that their teachers "have a strong Polish accent", "speak more like Polish than English", "cannot speak English at all", "use Polish vowels and consonants", "use always the same intonation" and "put stress in English words like in Polish words". The answers provided by Group Two were very significant. Those subjects were taught by two teachers, and while one of the teachers was assessed positively, the other one was criticized and the informants agreed that her pronunciation was not correct (the answer "not at all true").

*Does your teacher teach you English phonetics/pronunciation?*

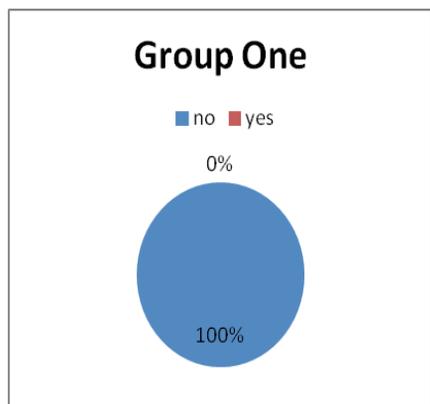


Figure 5.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group One.

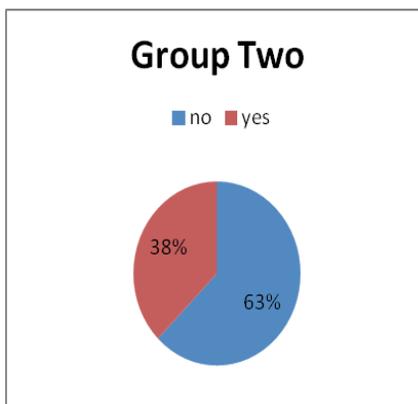


Figure 6.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Two.

This shows that teaching and learning L2 pronunciation is still neglected in Polish schools, even those top-ranked. Only students from bilingual Polish-English classes are sometimes taught English phonetics, but even this does not happen very often. Only one teacher admitted that

she tried to teach at least some basics of phonetics but she did not have much time for it and had to “steal” time from classes which were officially planned for other topics. However, her students commented that they were really satisfied because of this fact and that learning English pronunciation was a very interesting element of L2 classes.

*If not, would you like to attend such classes?*

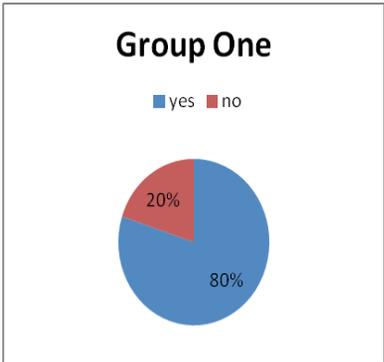


Figure 7.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group One.

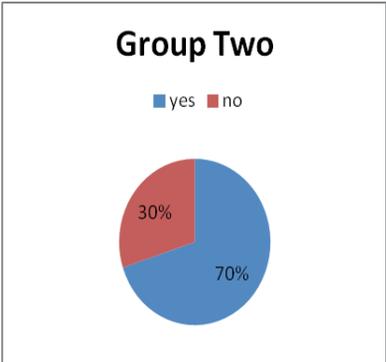


Figure 8.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Two.

As one may see, most study participants from Group One and Group Two would like to attend pronunciation/phonetics classes and their attitude is very positive. Especially subjects from Group One (non-linguistic high school class profiles) were interested in this kind of classes, which is rather surprising since they are not characterised by a high proficiency in English and English is not their main subject. Nevertheless, they would like to be able to practise their pronunciation skills. What is more surprising and even worrying, is the number of subjects from Group Two who do not find learning correct pronunciation as a desired element of language learning at school. As many as 30% of them neglected learning English pronunciation. Unfortunately, they did not provide any reason for such an opinion.

## Group Three and Group Four

*What are the most important elements of L2 learning?*

<b>Group Three</b>	
vocabulary	64%
grammar	57%
other*	43%
pronunciation	35%
conversations/speaking	25%
listening comprehension	25%
attending classes regularly	18%

Table 5.

The most important elements of L2 learning according to Group Three.

<b>Group Four</b>	
vocabulary	100%
grammar	75%
pronunciation	64%
other*	63%
conversations/speaking	50%

Table 6.

The most important elements of L2 learning according to Group Four

\* "other" included various answers rated less than 5% each

University students listed more elements of second language learning which they perceived as important. Although they mentioned a variety of skills and elements, grammar and vocabulary were still the most popular. Also pronunciation was still at the third position. However, it can be easily observed that the percentage of informants who found pronunciation important in this case, was much higher than in Group One and Group Two. Also there is a huge difference between Group Three (35.7%) and Group Four (63.75%). It may suggest that the

university course in English phonetics and phonology raised students' awareness concerning correct pronunciation in second language.

What must one learn to communicate in L2?

<b>Group Three</b>	
vocabulary	86%
grammar	57%
pronunciation	43%
other*	18%
conversations/speaking	11%
listening comprehension	7%

Table 7.

What one must learn to communicate in L2 according to Group Three.

<b>Group Four</b>	
vocabulary	100%
pronunciation	88%
grammar	83%
conversations/speaking	70%

Table 8.

What one must learn to communicate in L2 according to Group Four

\* "other" included various answers rated less than 5% each

Again, study participants from Group Three and Group Four gave more diverse answers than informants from Group One and Group Two. Similarly to high schools students, most university students mentioned here vocabulary and grammar, but also pronunciation. It seems that they realized that correct pronunciation is vital when one wants to communicate in an L2. What is also worth highlighting is the fact that in Group Four the answer "pronunciation" was given even more frequently than "grammar". In this group, 87.5% of informants decided that they needed correct pronunciation in L2 in order to communicate successfully with others.

Correct pronunciation in L2 is important. How far do you agree with this statement?

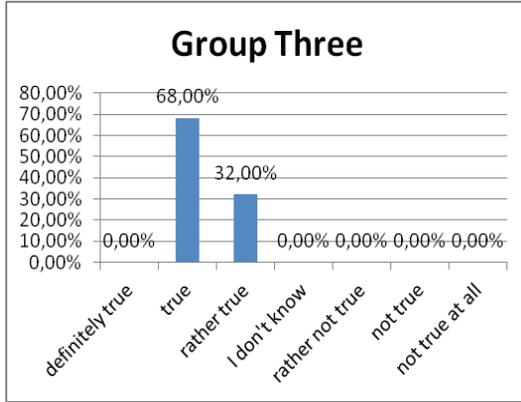


Figure 9.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three

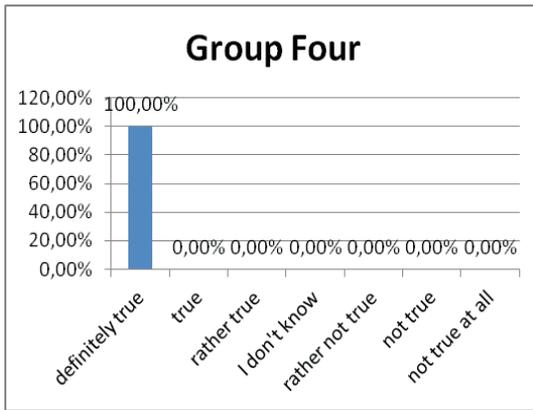


Figure 10.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four

These answers show that university students are language-oriented and language-aware. They know that correct pronunciation is crucial while learning a second language. Both groups chose only positive options in the question of importance of learning L2 pronunciation. Similarly to the previous questions, study participants from Group Four were more robust in their opinions. In their comments they wrote that correct pronunciation

is vital “in order to be understood by others”, “to avoid misunderstandings” and that “it raises their prestige among other users of English”.

*My junior high/high school teachers' pronunciation in English was correct. How far do you agree with this statement?*

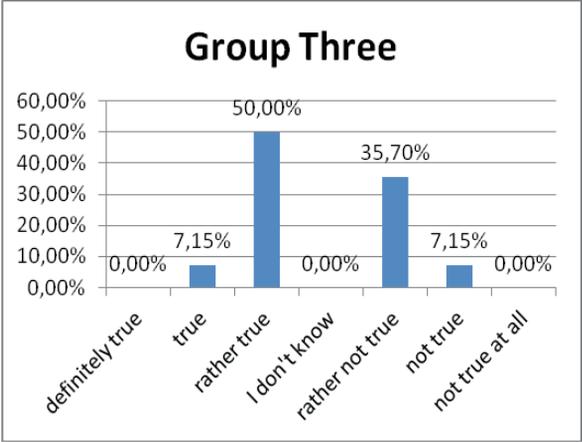


Figure 11.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three

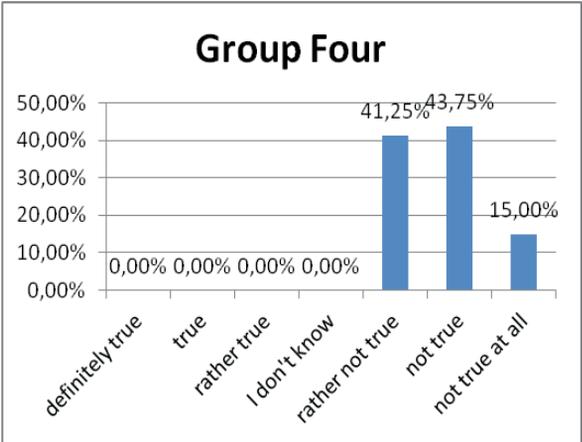


Figure 12.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four

Since both groups of informants consisted of relatively young people who could easily remember their high school and junior high school teachers, they were asked the aforementioned questions. Although some subjects from Group Three were critical of their former teachers, more of them assessed their teachers' pronunciation in English as correct. However, in Group Four all of the respondents criticized their former teachers' pronunciation. They also commented that during English phonetics and phonology course during their studies they learnt how one should speak and realized that their high school and junior high school teachers made a lot of mistakes and — what is worse — taught them the same mistakes. This may suggest that informants from Group Three assessed their teachers' pronunciation in English as correct or rather correct because they lacked sufficient knowledge about correct English pronunciation and soon their opinions may change.

*Did your teachers in high school teach you English pronunciation?*

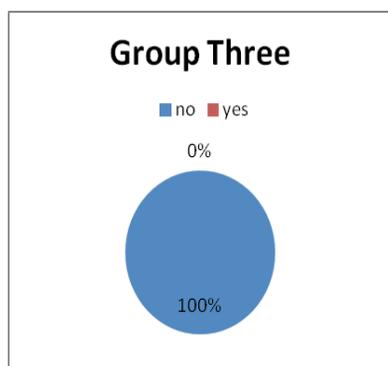


Figure 13.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three.

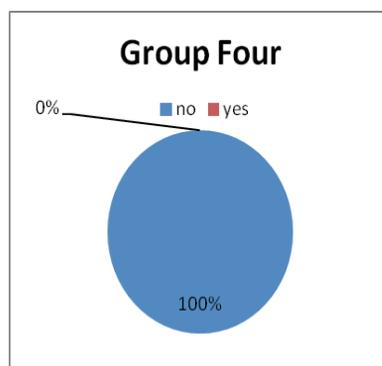


Figure 14.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four.

As it had been expected, unfortunately none of the subjects had had an opportunity to attend classes devoted to English phonetics or pronunciation. It shows that in comparison to the previous studies (mentioned by e.g. Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2008) nothing seems to have changed in

Polish schools concerning the attitude to teaching pronunciation during L2 courses.

*Should there be such classes in high schools?*

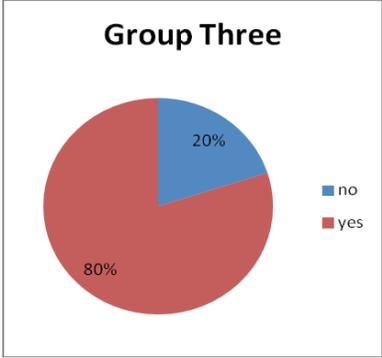


Figure 15.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three.

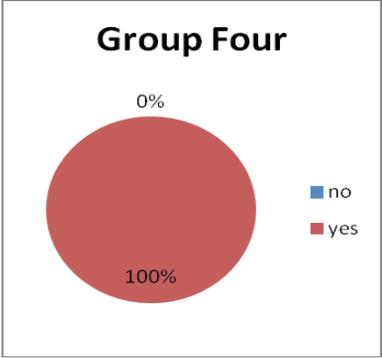


Figure 16.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three.

As one can see, most study participants agreed that in high schools there should be classes devoted to English pronunciation. Only 20% of informants from Group Three did not see such a need. They commented that “they don’t need such classes” or that “teachers lack appropriate knowledge to teach English pronunciation”. The others, however, commented that such classes “might be useful”, “would be desirable” and “are necessary”. A few subjects wrote that “such classes should not be too advanced but at least some basics should be taught”. One study participant even wrote about the problems she encountered herself during high school education. She commented that when she looked up new words in dictionaries she did not know how to pronounce them because she was not familiar with the IPA symbols.

*A course in English phonetics and phonology at the university is necessary. How far do you agree with this statement?*

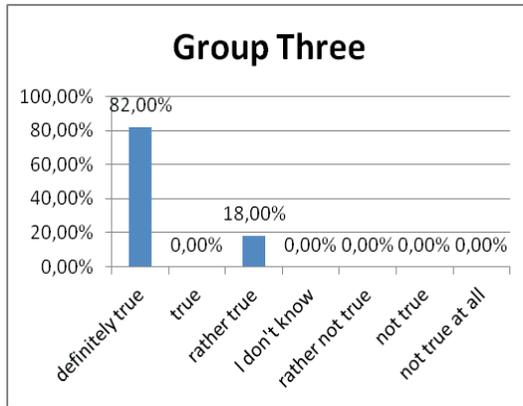


Figure 17.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Three

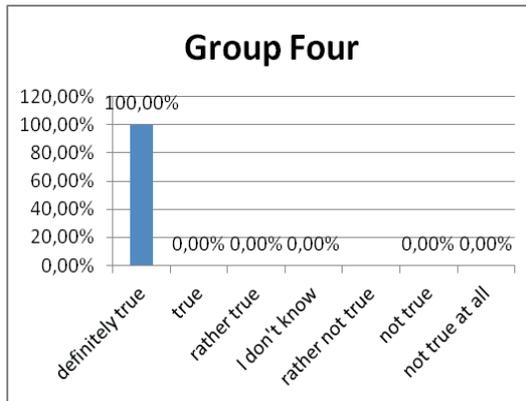


Figure 18.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four

These answers clearly show that students see the need to study English pronunciation and that pronunciation courses are a necessary element of language studies. It is noticed by both subjects who just begin studying at universities, and by those who have some experience in this area. However, the latter group is more certain that learning L2 phonetics and phonology is vital.

*This course has changed my pronunciation in English. How far do you agree with this statement? (A question for Group Four only)*

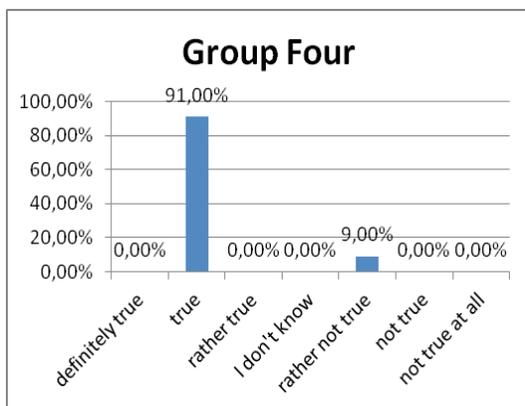


Figure 19.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four

*What exactly has changed?*

Group Four	
stress	100%
segments (vowels and consonants)	92%
intonation	85%
diphthongs	4%
other	3%

Table 9.

Answers provided by the subjects from Group Four

These two questions were for subjects from Group Four only. They revealed that the vast majority of students benefited from university course in English phonetics and phonology and that their pronunciation in English changed. They could list as many elements that had changed as they wanted to, but in most cases the students spoke with one voice. Certainly they improved their stress and intonation (which are completely different in English than in Polish) and segments (vowels and consonants; a couple

of informants highlighted diphthongs separately). This clearly shows that even if it is difficult, a course in English phonetics and phonology is useful and helps correct students' pronunciation in L2.

## Conclusions

Summing up, the gathered data suggest that Polish learners' attitude to learning English pronunciation is generally positive at high school and university levels. Both high school and university students see the need to speak correctly while using English as L2 and are willing to study English phonetics. They want to communicate with others, be understood and avoid misunderstandings. However, apart from English philology programmes, learners still lack opportunities to learn English pronunciation since it is not taught in high schools. This fact is usually criticized by learners who would like to learn at least basics of English phonetics. Although most students share similar beliefs and opinions concerning learning English pronunciation, the level of proficiency in English as a second language and the amount of training in L2 phonetics strengthens the sense of indispensability of studying English pronunciation and speaking L2 correctly. Especially students who completed the university course in English phonetics and phonology change their opinions about their own and their former teachers' pronunciation and appreciate the improvement in their phonetic awareness and abilities.

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