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REVIEWS

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HOW MUCH WOOD WOULD A WOODCHUCK CHUCK? ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE BOOK, A. MAŃKOWSKA, M. NOWACKA, M. KŁOCZOWSKA (EDS.), WYDAWNICTWO KONSORCJUM AKADEMICKIE, KRAKÓW–RZESZÓW–ZAMOŚĆ 2009

The book reviewed in this paper is a much needed English pronunciation handbook, which, according to the authors, is aimed primarily at first year students of English Studies. It is also recommended for anybody who wishes to improve the quality of their oral skills in English, including secondary school students who are about to take their final exams in English. It claims to be geared towards the specific needs and difficulties experienced by Polish learners of English. The authors themselves admit that it is fundamentally a practice book that at university level supplements other well known but more theory-oriented handbooks. As such it offers valuable help to trainers and students alike, partially filling an important gap in the materials available. The design and content of the book is comprehensive and consistent, making it easy to use among the plethora of similar books available on the market. It can therefore justifiably be claimed that the book is an important and welcome contribution to the discipline.

The range of material selected for presentation in the book comprises, first and foremost, all the vowels (long and short) of English, arranged and numbered according to Cardinal Vowels sequence, as well as diphthongs and some triphthongs. The vocalic part of the handbook is the most comprehensive of all. The second part deals with English consonant segments, of which 13 have been selected as they are the most problematic for Polish speakers. The problems range from the non-existence of certain items in Polish, differences in the details of pronunciation (e.g. the place of articulation, the velarised quality of [l] in many contexts) to the absence of certain co-articulating phenomena, cf. aspiration of [p, t, k] in English. The final part is devoted to four aspects of connected speech, namely stress-shift, assimilation, elision and weak forms. The glossary of terms included at the end of the book is a helpful tool for users, especially those relatively phonetically-untrained who try to make sense of some of the exercises headings.

The units in the handbook follow the same clear organizational structure. The organization is both coherent and compact, as well as predictable and logical, which makes it exceptional and at the same time easy to follow. For example, with vowels we begin with a very brief description of the segment, followed by

words for practice, all containing the target sound, sentences for practice, sections on deceptive spellings and proper names, all to be concluded with practice of the sound in context in the forms of proverbs, rhymes, limericks and tongue twisters. Words for Practice sections (and sentences for practice too, for that matter) are grouped into two parts, with Words for Practice 1 – the easier, more commonly used words – and Words for Practice 2 – the supposedly more difficult or sophisticated and less common words. The latter is the “English philology students” section. Additionally, the words are subdivided into groups according to the number of syllables and stress position in the items, with clear progression from easier to harder elements. Part 2 – the consonants – seems to be organized similarly, although this time, however, special care is taken to show the segments as used in a variety of contexts, with such details as degree of voicing, aspiration, release type and, occasionally, function (e.g. the *-es ending*). The part dealing with connected speech is organised independently, namely it tackles each feature in an appropriate manner: examples, contexts and meaningful practice. All this demonstrates that the authors had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve and how the progression was to be developed: from words in isolation, through progressively longer stretches of speech to rhymes, proverbs and limericks that are naturally used by speakers of English. All this is accompanied by carefully prepared and systematically presented phonetic transcription.

The main advantage of this handbook are the recordings that accompany it. Over three hours of spoken material cover all the exercises. The recordings are professional and done exclusively by native speakers of English in its Standard British English variety. The clear and straightforward coding of tracks makes them truly user-friendly. The recordings allow the book to be used in a self study mode, based on the listen-and-repeat procedure. The only problem that can be detected is that since the speakers say the words and the lines in a way that is completely natural to them, they produce variants which are still acceptable within the standard model trained. These variants have been transcribed with attention given to minute details and alternative, dictionary citations are offered in the form of a footnote. This could be confusing for students, who may wonder, first of all, which pronunciation to follow – the recording (“but then the sound is not there!”) or the dictionary form (“why is it different from what is in the sentence?”). The intentions of the authors are clear, this was probably meant to show that the transcription reflects the pronunciation as closely as possible, but from a didactic point of view it is rather unfortunate and confusing.

The sub-sections on Proper Names as well as Deceptive Spelling are a good idea as they tackle typical problematic items. Within these, however, the criteria for selecting some of the items are rather unclear. Whereas trap-items such as *victuals*, *lieutenant* or *corps* can be truly deceptive, others such as *idyllic*, *calm* or *stagnant* are hardly so. Many of the words cited tend to follow a certain regularity: *heather* – *leather*; *meadow-weapon*; *stealth* – *wealth*, *calm-palm*. It is difficult to understand why the spelling in these particular cases is so confusing. As for Proper Names, while they truly cover the most notorious problems speakers have with English proper names, they also contain many items that the majority

of students are unfamiliar with and therefore cannot relate to in any meaningful way. Individuals' first names (*Arthur, Martha*), place (or other geographical) names (*Prague, Niagara*) or some of the surnames of important figures in British or European history and culture (*Presley, Boleyn, Dante, Socrates*) are useful and meaningful, yet many others do not evoke any associations (*Reynolds? Beauchamp? Shaughnessy?*) and are treated by students as unnecessary and a rather useless nuisance.

An attractive feature of this handbook is that it manages to smuggle many desirable elements of natural speech into the many diverse exercise forms that it introduces. The sections with Sentences for Practice (1 and 2), introduced in the form of a back-chaining drill with sets of rhythmic word-groups, first provide a connection with the preceding section on individual words as they incorporate at least one of them in the chain and then they demand very rhythmic repetition, with clearly marked strong syllables, word-linking and weak forms. All this is done in a consistent manner even before any systematic study of these phenomena – especially the weak forms – is attempted. Thus the connected speech phenomena are introduced and practised as if incidentally and indirectly, and yet students, with their still highly efficient mimicking abilities, are able to cope successfully. The same can be said about the rhymes and limericks sections. It needs to be pointed out that, again, the linking marked in the transcription part frequently departs from what is heard in the recording or is applied with little logic or reason. From the didactic point of view, the “little arches” as the students call them are best ignored in the script.

The units of the first part of the book are arranged according to the Cardinal Vowels sequence, the close front unrounded vowels being the first that are dealt with. Our experience of working the book for the last few years has shown that such a sequence, although well justified linguistically, appears to be of questionable didactic merit. The opening vowels, the long and short “i”, as they are often called in phonetic jargon, prove to be a serious challenge. It is a well-known fact that a Polish secondary school graduate, even one who can boast of a very high score in English in the final exam (*matura*), may have a rather vague idea of English pronunciation rules. Sadly, schools generally favour communication skills over grammatical precision, let alone phonetic accuracy. The didactic problem with the first two vowels of the book arises from the fact that the vast majority of the words selected for practice are too sophisticated, both phonetically and semantically. Our students have often complained that they find it very difficult to get both the sound and its environment in the word right, thus having no sense of achievement. In their opinion the book concentrates on trap words rather than on actual pronunciation practice. Interestingly, the students' opinions change radically when the order of teaching departs from the chronological, or rather the cardinal suggested by the book. Students who are first exposed to “easier” monophthongs, for instance such as /e/, /ʌ/ or /ɒ/, develop a better attitude to matters of phonetic detail and are later on more willing to tackle *allegiance* or *epitome*.

Of the two opening vowels, it is the short “i” or /ɪ/, where the special needs of the Polish learners, stated in the introduction, seem to have been slightly overlooked.

The presentation of the material does not reflect the fact that increasingly many borrowings from English into Polish contain the sound in question in the donor language. This sound, due to the visual aspect of its graphic representation, loses its original quality and eventually emerges as /i/ in the mouths of Polish speakers. It is only natural that words like: *film, ring, lifting, doping, parking, billing, windows, hit, click, service, drink*, etc. are pronounced in Polish with /i/. However, this adaptation into Polish strikes back when the same words have to be used in English with the original sound, that is /ɪ/. This aspect is not suitably addressed in the book. Consequently, students are made to struggle with *exquisite* or *omniscient*, while they may still stumble over *sit* and *bit*.

The chapter on fricatives concentrates on only four such consonants: /θ/, /ð/ and /s/, /z/, on the grounds that the first two do not occur in Polish and the latter two are articulated in a different place. The choice of dental fricatives is obvious: Polish speakers dislike them and will avoid them at all costs. The book deals with the “th” sounds accurately and in depth. The time and attention devoted to the sound /z/ is justifiable too: it suffers in Polish from final obstruent devoicing and, on top on that, is mostly represented graphically as the letter “s”, which Polish speakers interpret phonetically.

It is not at all clear why the English palato-alveolar fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ and affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ have been ignored. They are not considered in the book at all, although the difference in the articulation between these sounds and their Polish equivalents is much more audible and striking than the acoustic difference between the English /s/ (which is studied in the book) and the Polish /s/. Very few Polish speakers will of their own accord be able to hear the difference between the initial sounds in the English *some* and the Polish *sam*. They will, however, immediately detect a foreign accent in the palato-alveolar articulation of the fricatives or affricates in words such as: *show, lunch, jogging, DJ* or *HBO*, especially when they are pronounced in this manner in an otherwise Polish context.

The plosives are the largest group of consonants practised in the book. This is so because of the differences in the articulation, the absence of aspiration and dissimilar voicing strategies. All these aspects are carefully and minutely dealt with in the exercises; however, what seems to dominate in each unit is the meticulous attention paid to various types of release. It is not clear why students have to practise processes that are to a large extent present in their native language: *ładny, tnę, kopmy, róbmy* (nasal release), *tlen, dla* (lateral release), *oddać, lekki* (inaudible release). One might argue that the inaudible release in Polish works only in homorganic environments, whereas the English context is wider and, therefore, needs further practice. Interestingly, on close inspection the audio materials show that the various types of release, as presented in the exercises, hardly ever find their realisation in the mouths of the recorded native speakers: the various types of release are by and large inaudible.

The book was first published in 2009, four years after the onset of the new formula of the final exam in secondary schools in 2005. Interestingly enough, the pedagogical approach to the phonetic material as presented in the book goes back to the time preceding the introduction of the changes. In the late 1990's and the

early 2000's the average level of language proficiency of students entering English Studies was much higher than today and as such it clearly shaped the authors' didactic experience. This finds its reflection in the selection of the aspects of phonetic detail and, for the most part, in the choice of the vocabulary to practise. What used to be an undeniable asset only a decade ago may prove to be a major drawback nowadays. When confronted with a number of unintelligible words, students get discouraged and easily lose interest in the practice. As a result, their pronunciation is not getting better.

It is almost certain that in the years to come we cannot expect a significant increase in the language proficiency level of students leaving secondary schools and entering English Studies. If this is really the case, it may happen that many parts of the book reviewed in this paper will become too difficult for an average 1st year student of English. These observations are justified also by the fact that the book was used by the authors of the review in three full cycles of teaching, both with day and extramural students. It has become increasingly more evident that, although valuable, the book proves both somewhat insufficient and at the same time slightly too challenging for a good number of students.