Danica M. Jerotijević Tišma

University of Kragujevac
Faculty of Philology and Arts
Department for English Language and Literature

SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS' VIEWS ON L2 PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES

Abstract: Even though EFL learners generally express the need for efficient pronunciation training and consider pronunciation itself as an important segment in L2 skills acquisition, few studies deal with their standpoints regarding pronunciation difficulties, strategies and needs. Inevitable pronunciation problems arise due to sundry factors such as L1 interference, markedness, universal development factors, age of acquisition, target language exposure, learner motivation etc, yet the ability to recognize the sources of pronunciation difficulties represents a significant step towards overcoming them. The present study therefore investigates Serbian EFL learners' viewpoints related to their pronunciation problems, as well as potential strategies for overcoming them. The results of the conducted questionnaire demonstrate Serbian secondary school learners' awareness of the existence of pronunciation difficulties at both segmental and suprasegmental levels, but also simultaneous lack of specific actions towards the implementation of the efficient ways for their abatement and potential eventual disappearance.

Key words: Serbian EFL learners, attitudes, L2 pronunciation problems.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Even though pronunciation teaching research was neglected in the past, the situation has been improving in the recent years, probably due to the recognition of pronunciation as one of the most important skills in the acquisition of a foreign language (Davis 1999; Burns 2003). Beside acquiring sufficient knowledge of semantics and syntax of a language, a learner must possess an admirable level of proficiency in segmental and suprasegmental features so as to impress the listener. A successful command of English pronunciation means accurate perception and production of sounds, rhythm and intonation, enabling the learner to understand and be comprehensible to others (Seidlhofer 2001). For Eckman et al. (2003) pronouncing the words goes hand in hand with learning their meaning in the process of successful SLA.

danicajerotijevic@gmail.com

17

The present study aims at exploring Serbian secondary school EFL learners' views on their pronunciation difficulties, strategies for overcoming them and opinions regarding their pronunciation needs. The paper was inspired by a similar study by Kolokdarah (2010), conducted at California State University, Fresno.

2. TYPES OF L2 PRONUNCIATION ERRORS

One of the most significant steps towards overcoming pronunciation difficulties is indubitably the detection and recognition of errors experienced. Having taken into consideration some of the aforementioned factors that contribute to erroneous production, various scholars suggest possible classifications of pronunciation errors.

Moulton (1962) proposed the following division: phonemic, phonetic, allophonic and distributional errors. Bearing in mind the phonetic and phonemic habits from L1, a learner substitutes an unfamiliar target language phone, in the first, or phoneme, in the latter case, for a familiar L1 phone, i.e. phoneme. Phonetic errors are thus harder to explain than phonemic since learners do not easily realize that they made a mistake as in the situation when they opted for an entirely different phoneme. An example for a phonemic error would be an American student's pronunciation of German "Nacht" as /nʌkt/ instead of /nʌht/, and a phonetic one would be substituting the unfamiliar uvular /r/ in German for American constricted /r/. Allophonic characteristics of L1 are to blame for allophonic errors whereas rules of distribution are logically responsible for distributional errors. To exemplify, Americans alter German /t/ for its allophones in American English, and regarding distributional errors, English has no option for placing German /ts/ in word initial position, as in "zu", which is why English speakers usually choose /z/, guided by the spelling.

Much later, based on similar criteria, Mathew (2005) suggested a broad, but rather useful classification into transfer and developmental errors upon which we elaborated earlier.

Other authors sorted pronunciation errors according to intelligibility criteria, i.e. errors that cause serious misunderstandings and inhibit communication are positioned at the top of the scale as the most significant, followed by less impeding ones (Jenkins 1996). The division includes:

1) major mispronunciations of critical vowels and consonants (except for /θ/ and /ð/, since contextual clues aid intelligibility), as in "hit" and "hid" where accurate pronunciation is crucial for comprehension;
2) inappropriate use of sounds requiring aspiration, for example "ferry" and "very", or "sue" and "zoo";
3) consonant cluster simplifications, related to elision and epenthesis, for example Japanese [pərədʌkto:] for "product";

4) incorrect word stress, as for example stressing the first instead of the second syllable in "important" etc. It is important to note that some languages, such as Japanese or Spanish, are syllable-timed unlike English which is stress-timed;

5) not adjusting articulators, i.e. mouth, tongue and lips to the patterns of a foreign language, but using them in a familiar native-like fashion, which, combined with inaccurate production of vowels and consonants, results in utter confusion.

Errors regarding tone groups and diphthong mispronunciation are deliberately omitted since the author herself suggests more exhaustive research that would confirm current assumptions.

3. SOURCES OF L2 PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS

EFL learners have great pronunciation difficulties even after years of practice and these are the result of various interrelated factors.

L1 interference, or language transfer, seems to be one of the major factors contributing to the existence of the phenomenon known as foreign accent. Only does transfer occur if there are corresponding features between the mother tongue and the language being acquired. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis once stated that the more similar L1 and L2 features are, the easier the acquisition for the learners (Lado 1957). However, later investigations suggested contrary viewpoints. Namely, Flege (1987) claimed that it was precisely those similar sounds that were more difficult to acquire, i.e. his Speech Learning Model (Flege 1995) underscored that the greater the difference between sounds the higher the possibility for learners to perceive it, thus produce the sounds accurately.

Another important factor is the age of learners at which they begin the acquisition of L2. The proponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis believe that the most successful results are achieved if learning starts before the age of six and no later than the age of fifteen (Long 1990). Nevertheless, two issues remain unresolved: whether an especially talented individual will be able to learn to speak without a foreign accent in adulthood as well as when the previously mentioned phenomenon first appears (Flege et al. 1997).

In order to be able to produce foreign language sounds correctly, learners should be able to perceive them correctly first (Flege 1995). Inaccurate perception frequently hinders successful acquisition, and causes may come from various sources, e.g. learners may omit to perceive the difference between sounds since they do not possess proper perceptual sensitivity or their mother tongue phonological system does not regard the problematic feature as relevant for the distinction of sounds.

Perhaps more closely related to the ELT methodology are personality and motivational factors. Although these factors may affect acquisition indirectly, issues such as anxiety, self-assurance, self-esteem and learning involvement should not be disregarded. Personal and professional goals increase the desire to achieve native-like proficiency in foreign language pronunciation (Masgoret, Gardner 2003). Learners' attitude proved likewise significant, i.e. learners who pay a lot of attention to their pronunciation have better production results (Elliot 1995).

4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH REGARDING LEARNERS' VIEWS ON L2 PRONUNCIATION

Little attention has been paid to learners' perceptions regarding pronunciation instruction in EFL teaching contexts (Kang 2010). However, scarce studies suggest that students recognize the importance of pronunciation learning, since they regard pronunciation as a priority and a significant skill in L2 acquisition (Willing 1988). A rare study demonstrated that students reported that pronunciation represented the main cause of communication breakdowns, and more importantly, a significant percentage of respondents was able to recognize the exact pronunciation difficulties they were experiencing (Derwing, Rossiter 2002). However, it is worth noting that the participants from the aforementioned study expressed willingness for adequate training and active involvement in the systematic pronunciation instruction, since they find it highly beneficial.

There is a discrepancy between teachers' and learners' views regarding their pronunciation achievement goals, i.e. several studies showed that students usually aim to sound like native speakers, while teachers believe general intelligibility is more important (Timmis 2002). Moreover, the same study reported that students allegedly strive to attain an accent close to inner circle varieties, however, they are not entirely able to distinguish correctly between e.g. RP or General American. Learners likewise fail to completely understand other English accents (Kang 2010), which points to the fact that attempting to achieve native-like proficiency actually means imitating only the two previously mentioned best known varieties. Another contradiction is the finding that teachers regard pronunciation instruction as difficult and impossible to apply, while learners recognize the lack and necessity of it (Pardo 2004).

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. The Aim of the Research

The present study aims at exploring Serbian EFL learners' attitudes regarding the possible difficulties they experience when pronouncing English, as well as what strategies they employ to make the pronunciation tasks less demanding, taking their pronunciation needs, in terms of effective instruction, into consideration, too.

5.2. Research Questions

Having the aim and theoretical background of the study in mind, we based the investigation on the following research questions:

1. What do Serbian secondary school EFL learners believe are their greatest pronunciation shortcomings?
2. What are the strategies they apply in order to moderate pronunciation problems?

5.3. Participants

The total of 236 final-year students of secondary schools in Jagodina and Kragujevac participated in the study (153 female, 83 male; mean age = 17.22). All the participants had no previous experience pertaining to any kind of systematic pronunciation training.

5.4. Instruments

In order to obtain the results required by the suggested research questions, we conducted a questionnaire containing 19 Likert-scale questions and 4 open-ended type of questions. The questions in the survey were adapted from the previously conducted similar research by Kolokdarah (2010). Kolokdarah's questionnaire was based on the sample questions from a previous study (Derwing, Rossiter 2002) and it included 5-level Likert scale (1: strongly agree – 5: strongly disagree) (Kolokdarah 2010). The original questionnaire's item "I don't know" was changed to "not sure" because our participants were students unfamiliar with the procedure of phonetic training or had no prior knowledge regarding English phonetics and phonology taught in the formal context at least.

5.5. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants during the regular English classes in the period from October to December 2011.

5.6. Data analysis

In the analysis of data we applied both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results of the questionnaire were presented in percentage counts, with additional descriptive explanations for the results of the open-ended questions.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the sake of intelligibility and clarity, the results of the questionnaire are presented in the following table:

6.1 Table 1: *Results of the students' responses to the questions*

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. When I have problems communicating, it is most likely because of the pronunciation problems.	6 2.54%	39 16,53%	40 16.95%	103 43.64%	48 20.34%
2. I am aware of my main pronunciation problem areas.	12 5.08%	14 5.93%	113 47.88%	87 36.86%	10 4.24%
3. It is difficult for people to understand my pronunciation.	41 17.37%	74 31.36%	85 36.02%	19 8.05%	17 7.2%
4. I have not taken any pronunciation courses.	225 95.34%	6 2.54%	5 2.12%	/	/
5. I would take a pronunciation course if it were offered.	61 25.85%	95 40.25%	38 16.1%	30 12.71%	12 5.08%
6. I listen to tapes/television/music/movies as much as possible.	160 67.8%	60 25.42%	14 5.93%	2 0.85%	/
7. I usually pronounce loudly words that are difficult to pronounce.	8 3.39%	26 11.02%	67 28.39%	103 43.64%	32 13.56%
8. I try to understand English pronunciation rules.	33 13.98%	54 22.88%	83 35.17%	44 18.64%	22 9.32%
9. I pay attention to my pronunciation when I am talking.	29 12.29%	129 54.66%	28 11.86%	38 16.1%	12 5.08%
10. I speak slowly in order to have correct pronunciation.	/	17 7.2%	102 43.22%	89 37.71%	28 11.86%
11. I notice people's mouth movement when they are speaking in English.	6 2.54%	45 19.07%	88 37.29%	80 33.9%	17 7.2%

12. I notice contrasts between my native language pronunciations and English language pronunciations.	4 1.69%	87 36.86%	79 33.47%	65 27.54%	1 0.42%
13. I paraphrase what I want to say if the listener cannot understand me.	48 20.34%	111 47.03%	35 14.83%	24 10.17%	18 7.63%
14. I write down the pronunciation of words in English using phonetic transcription.	/	2 0.85%	32 13.56%	190 80.51%	12 5.08%
15. I write down the pronunciation of words in my native language.	55 23.3%	97 41.1%	34 14.41%	40 16.95%	10 4.24%
16. I can correct my pronunciation when I am speaking.	17 7.2%	60 25.42%	31 13.14%	85 36.07%	43 18.22%
17. If I do not know how to pronounce a word, I ask a native speaker.	/	1 0.42%	82 34.75%	121 51.27%	32 13.56%
18. I am not good at pronouncing just the sounds that are absent in my native language.	13 5.5%	102 43.22%	91 38.56%	18 7.63%	12 5.08%
19. I do not speak English using appropriate intonation.	74 31.36%	96 40.68%	44 18.64%	12 5.08%	10 4.24%

The results of the questionnaire showed that more than 60% percent of participants (mean 75.5, standard deviation 38.89) generally disagree that it might be pronunciation that caused problems in communication in L2, in this case English. The majority is not certain whether they are aware of their pronunciation problems, and, as a matter of fact, a significant percentage of participants (36.86%, mean 48.5, standard deviation 54.45) admits lack of awareness, which can be explained by the deficiency of systematic and well-planned phonetic training and lack of general knowledge about English phonological inventory. The latter is confirmed in survey question no. 4, since the participants either reported having no experience with phonetic instruction or were not sure what the question was about, which further proves their lack of awareness. However, it seems encouraging that more than 60% of learners express willingness to take part in any kind of phonetic training. Although the majority of interviewees is not sure whether it is difficult for others to understand their pronunciation, even higher percentage (more than 48% overall, mean 57.5, standard deviation 23.33) of the students agrees that their interlocutors have troubles comprehending their articulation.

Concerning the strategies learners employ to overcome pronunciation problems, the survey demonstrated that more than 90% of the learners listen to music or watch TV and movies in English, which provides genuine L2 input. More than a half of the participants do not pronounce loudly words they find difficult to pronounce. The learners do pay attention to pronunciation when speaking, but they are not certain about whether or not they try to understand English pronunciation rules, which is most likely because they lack pronunciation instruction and knowledge. A similar explanation may be applied for the following two questions, namely, students are likewise uncertain about whether they should speak more slowly so as to be better understood, or whether they should pay attention to the

mouth movements. Even though the majority (36.86%) notices the differences between English and Serbian phonetic features, a similar percentage is not sure about the contrasts between their mother tongue and L2, which again points to the already reported lack of awareness. More than 60% of the participants paraphrase their utterance if the interlocutor is unable to understand them, yet the causes for the lack of comprehension may not be phonological by nature. It seems disappointing that the majority of the learners write down the correct pronunciation of novel words in Serbian (more than 60%), rather than using phonetic transcription, but it is not so surprising considering the fact that they never had phonetic training. The greatest number of learners does not know how to correct their pronunciation while speaking, and only one interviewee reported to have asked a native speaker when uncertain about the correct pronunciation of a particular word. Almost a half of the participants conservatively believe that it is merely the distinct features in L1 and L2 that represent problems in pronunciation, and, expectedly, the majority never uses appropriate intonation, which draws attention to the fact that the participants lack knowledge in both segmental and suprasegmental levels of foreign language phonology.

6.2. Results of the open-ended questions

The first question in the open-ended section of the questionnaire regarded students' opinion concerning which level of phonology they believed was more important. The results showed that the participants believed both levels were equally important for foreign language learners.

Graph 1. *The importance of Phonological Levels*
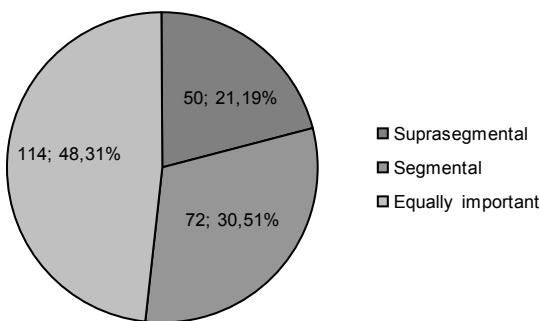
The next question was designed to list further pronunciation problems students might have that were not provided in the previous part of the survey. The most frequent answers are presented in the graph. Namely, the pronunciation of individual sounds and words allegedly represents the biggest challenge for the

24

participants, which points to the increased orientation towards the segmental part of interlanguage phonology, although they reported that both levels were equally significant.

Graph 2. *Stated Pronunciation Problems*
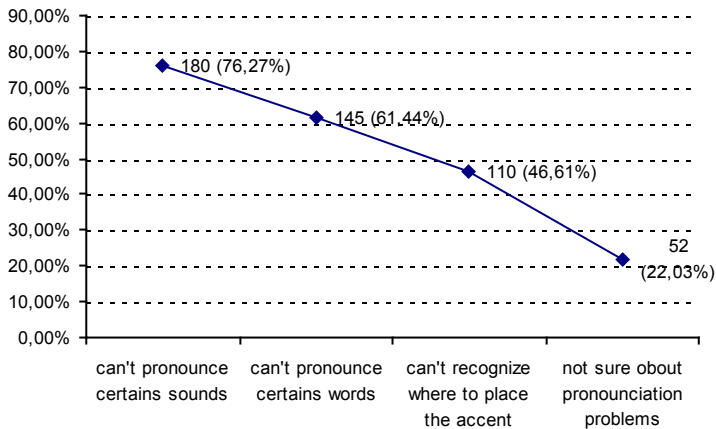
When it comes to the strategies students employ to overcome the reported difficulties, the results demonstrated that the students mostly relied on the teacher's assistance as well as the Internet, thus the combination of the two, i.e. teachers' increased awareness in the online possibilities for practising pronunciation might be highly beneficial.

Graph 3. *Learners' Strategies*
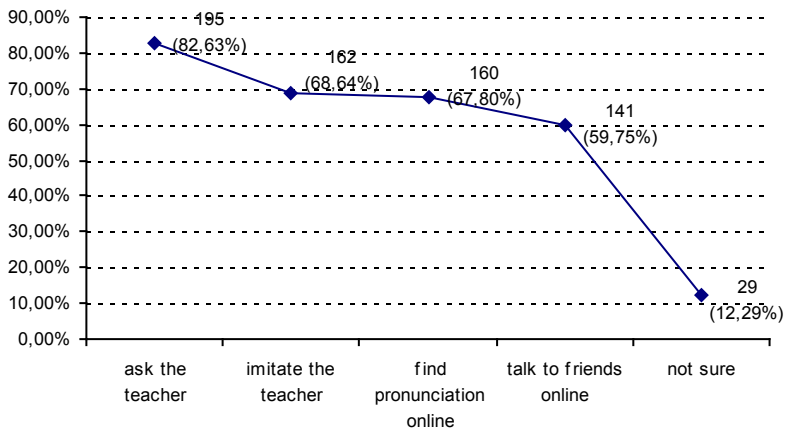
The last question in the open-ended part of the survey concerned students' suggestions to teachers, i.e. what they believe teachers can do to enhance their students' pronunciation proficiency. The results show the necessity for genuine target language input and the incorporation of online resources in everyday curriculum.

Graph 4. *Suggestions to Teachers*
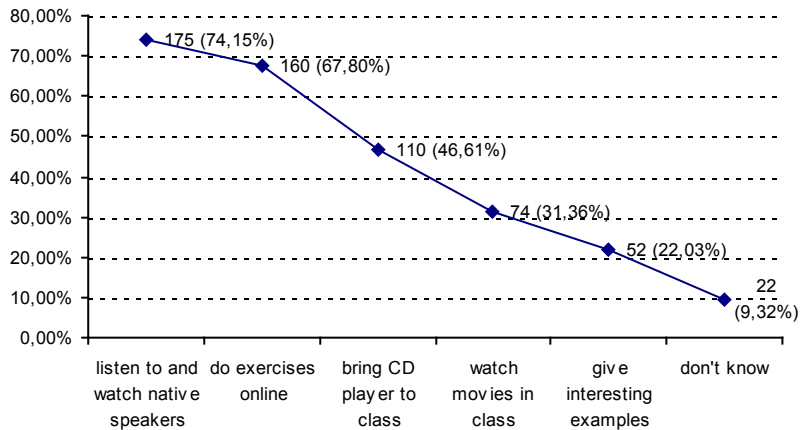
If we compare the results obtained in the present study to the findings from the study by Kolokdarah (2010), we notice significant differences. Namely, a considerably smaller percentage of the participants in the present study agrees that pronunciation problems cause problems in communication, however, a higher percentage admits that it is difficult for others to understand their pronunciation. The general lack of awareness and deficiency of pronunciation instruction is clearly visible in the discrepancies regarding the applied techniques for improving pronunciation. All the strategies are in favour of the participants from the previous study, i.e. a much higher percentage of the learners actually takes actions to overcome the difficulties in articulation, such as loud repetition, writing down difficult pronunciations, noticing mouth movements, etc. Furthermore, a significantly higher percentage of Serbian students writes pronunciation in their mother tongue, which points to the lack of relevant instruction. Serbian students believe both levels are important while the participants from the previous study believe suprasegmental level is more significant for the overall pronunciation acquisition.

7. CONCLUSION

After the presentation of the relevant theoretical considerations and the findings of the previous related studies, the results of the conducted questionnaire

were presented and elaborated on. The results demonstrated Serbian EFL learners' lack of awareness regarding their pronunciation difficulties and inconsistent application of the available strategies for their eventual abatement. The participants in the study likewise reported the need for systematic phonetic training and provided suggestions for teachers regarding the possible pronunciation activities that may be incorporated in everyday English curriculum.

The design of the questionnaire and the formulation of the questions perhaps represent the potential limitation of the study. Had the questions been formulated distinctly the large percentage of "not sure" answers might have been avoided, however, it points to the participants' lack of knowledge regardless.

The significance of teachers' attitude towards teaching pronunciation is indispensable, since the learners primarily rely on their instructors for help in overcoming pronunciation problems. Hence it seems necessary for teachers to recognize the importance of the inclusion of diverse types of exercises and materials for teaching English pronunciation in regular classes, with the addition of online resources as much as they are available.

REFERENCES

Bernz (2003): A. Burns, *Clearly speaking: pronunciation in action for teachers*, National Center for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquaire University, Sydney NSW 2109.

Dejvis (1999): C. Davis, Will the use of videos designed for the purpose of teaching English pronunciation improve the learners' production of discrete sounds by at least 80% over a 12-week period? In: *Action Research Monographs*, Pennsylvania Action Research Network. A Section 353 Project of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education. ERIC Document [ED440 219].

Derving, Rositer (2002): T. M., Derwing, M. J. Rossiter, ESL learners' perceptions of their pronunciation needs and strategies, *System,* 30, 155–166.

Ekman i dr. (2003): F. R. Eckman, A. Elreyes, and G. K. Iverson, Some principles of second language phonology, *Second Language Research*, 19(3), 169–208.

Eliot (1995): A. R. Elliot, Foreign Language Phonology: Field independence, attitude, and the success of formal instruction in Spanish pronunciation, *The Modern Language Journal*, 79(iv), 530–542.

Flegi (1987): J. E. Flege, A critical period for learning to pronounce foreign languages?, *Applied Linguistics*, 8, 162–177.

Flegi (1995): J. E. Flege, Second language speech learning: Theory, findings, and problems. In W. Strange (Ed.), *Speech perception and linguistic experience: Issues in cross-language research*, Timonium, MD: York Press, 233–277.

Flegi i dr. (1997): J. E. Flege, E. M. Frieda, T. Nozawa, Amount of native language (L1) use affects the pronunciation of an L2, *Journal of Phonetics*, 25, 169–186.

Dženkins (1996): J. Jenkins, Changing pronunciation priorities for successful communication in international context, *Speak Out!* No.17.

Keng (2010): O. Kang, ESL learners' attitudes toward pronunciation instruction and varieties of English. In J. Levis & K. LeVelle (eds*.*)*, Proceedings of the 1st Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference.* Ames, IA: Iowa State University, 105–118.

Kologdarh (2010): V. R. Kolokdaragh, ESL/EFL Learners' Perception of their Pronunciation Needs and Strategies, *The Forty First Annual State CATESOL Conference*, Santa Clara.

Long (1990): M. H. Long, Maturational constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12, 251–285.

Mazgoret, Gardner (2003): A.-M. Masgoret, R. C. Gardner, Attitudes, motivation, and second language learning: A meta-analysis of studies conducted by Gardner and associates, *Language Learning*, 53, 123–163.

Metju (2005): Ingrid Mathew, Errors in pronunciation of consonants by learners of English as a foreign language whose first languages are Indonesian, Gayo and Acehnese Monash, *University Linguistics Papers*, Volume 3, No. 2, 29–44.

Molton (1962): W.G. Moulton, *The Sounds of English and German*, Chicago: CUP.

Pardo (2004): Dario Barrera Pardo, Can Pronunciation Be Taught? A Review of Research and Implications for Teaching, *Revista Estudios Ingleses* 17, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Alicante.

Sajdlhofer (2001): B. Seidlhofer, Pronunciation, In: Carter, R. and Nunan, D. (eds), *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56–65.

Timis (2002): I. Timmis, Native-speaker norms and international English: A classroom view, *ELT Journal*, 56 (3), 240–249.

Viling (1988): K. Willing, AMES survey of learning styles. In: Nunan, D. (ed) *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education*, Sydney: Adult Migrant Education Program, 99–199.

Даница М. Јеротијевић Тишма
Универзитет у Крагујевцу
Филолошко-уметнички факултет
Катедра за англистику

СТАВОВИ СРПСКИХ УЧЕНИКА ПО ПИТАЊУ ТЕШКОЋА У ИЗГОВОРУ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ КАО СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Резиме: Имајући у виду недостатак студија које се баве ставовима српских ученика по питању тешкоћа у изговору и могућим стратегијама којима би се дате

потешкоће превазишле, наш рад има за циљ да истражи на који начин српски сред-њошколци који уче енглески као страни језик виде проблеме са изговором енглеског и које су њихове потребе по питању практичне наставе фонетике. Како бисмо одго-ворили на постављена истраживачка питања, спровели смо анкету која је садржала два типа питања, а резултати су обрађени квантитативном и квалитативном мето-дом. У истраживању је учествовало 236 ученика четврте године средњих школа из Јагодина и Крагујевца. Резултати показују да српски ученици нису у потпуности свесни свог изговора али изражавају спремност и потребу за пажљиво осмишљеним фонетским тренингом.

Кључне речи: ставови српских ученика, енглески као страни језик, проблеми са изговором.