ELT Revisited

ELT Revisited:

Some Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

Edited by

Marcela Malá and Zuzana Šaffková

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PREFACE

The present volume contains selected papers given during the 9th International Conference of the Association of Czech Teachers of English, *Teaching for Tomorrow,* which was hosted by the English Department of the Faculty of Science, Humanities and Education at the Technical University of Liberec, Czech Republic.

The Conference brought together ELT professionals from primary, secondary and tertiary education to discuss a variety of EFL-related topics ranging from reports on language research to viewpoints and insights on classroom practice. The collection of articles that were selected for inclusion in the present volume was finally called *ELT Revisited: Some Theoretical and Practical Perspectives*. The contributions are grouped into three sections: a) *Focus on Selected Language Topics*, b) *Increasing Learner Autonomy*, and c) *Innovative TEFL Ideas*. In each section the papers by individual authors are arranged alphabetically.

Focus on Selected Language Topics offers four articles. The contribution by Nicola Karásková deals with the pronunciation problems faced by Czech learners of English in the area of segmental phonology. When suggesting how teaching pronunciation could be improved in the future, she draws the attention of the reader to Comenius who, in the 17th century, emphasized the importance of mastering the phonology of a foreign language in the initial stage of learning it.

Marcela Malá focuses on the findings of her diachronic research which indicated that in written English non-finite clauses are becoming increasingly prominent. She considers possible reasons for this trend and makes critical comments on the treatment of non-finite structures in books intended for advanced learners of English.

The article by Renata Šimůnková concerns epistemic and deontic interpretations of *should* and *ought to*. She compares examples found in British fiction with their Czech translations and also tries to capture possible differences in meaning between these two modal verbs.

Czenglish is the focus of Jana Zvěřinová's study. In it she presents her solution to the problem of negative transfer of Czech to the acquisition of English by using corpus-based activities. They are prepared with respect to typical mistakes made by Czech learners of English. It is believed that

exposing students to the correct language used in corpora raises their language awareness and motivates them to eliminate their mistakes.

In Part II, entitled *Increasing Learner Autonomy,* there are three articles. Anna Michońska-Stadnik investigates metacognitive strategies which are supposed to help students become more effective in their studies. She explores this issue by analysing a questionnaire completed by a group of students who study and work at the same time.

The topic of the academic achievement of secondary-school students in the first year of study is discussed in Irina Minakova's contribution. The findings of her research reveal that first-year students were influenced mainly by extrinsic motivation, but they had the potential to gain learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In the article there are examples of activities that can develop these abilities.

Hanna Šteflová investigates inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar. In her research she used a questionnaire in which she tried to ascertain which of these two approaches students prefer. The findings speak in favour of the deductive approach even though the article emphasizes the importance of using both approaches in the classroom because they complement one another.

The three articles in Part III focus on *Innovative TEFL Ideas*. Dana Hánková explores the potential of the texts in English and Czech that provide the same piece of information. She shows several practical activities that demonstrate how these texts can be used to compare and contrast the similarities and differences in use between the two languages.

The article by Jana Němečková describes a European project implemented in upper-secondary schools which practises language skills as well as thinking skills and uses features of the Content and Language Integrated Learning methodology. Such projects are in accordance with the newly defined national curriculum. They help students improve their language skills as well as become more aware of their role as citizens of Europe.

And finally, Zuzana Šaffková strives to take an innovative approach to homework. Her article lists the most important features of homework that are necessary if the overall language skills of learners are to be improved.

We do hope that the present volume will appeal to teachers of English as a foreign language as well as to those who are otherwise engaged in the EFL/ESL profession.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PART I:

FOCUS ON SELECTED LANGUAGE TOPICS

An Overview of Problematic Features of English Phonology for Czech Learners of English

Nicola S. Karásková

Abstract

As students of English can testify, English pronunciation is rarely given high priority or taught systematically in Czech EFL classrooms. Learners are immediately confronted with an array of phonological challenges within whole words. This has not always been the case. Comenius advocated the mapping of pronunciation and spelling "before all things." While phonics has been returning to the L1 English language classroom, it has yet to become an integral part of L2 English language teaching. As an aid, particularly for Czech teachers of English, this article describes the problems which Czech speakers have with aspects of segmental phonology. Real-life examples of phonological errors are given. Failure to teach good pronunciation, it is argued, does a disservice not only to today's students who will be tomorrow's teachers but to the next generation of learners too, their students. It is also suggested that modern teachers can apply timeless principles from the past to meet both present and future challenges.

Key words: English segmental phonology, phonemes, pronunciation problems of Czech learners of English, Comenius

1. Introduction: the Czech context

1.1 English pronunciation at Czech schools

Czech learners of English rarely seem to be introduced to the basic contrastive features of English pronunciation, let alone taught these systematically. In their first semester of an English degree at the Technical University of Liberec (TUL), a Czech student, who may well have been

learning English for over nine years, invariably remarks ruefully: "At school no one ever corrected my pronunciation." Another, labouring long under a misconception, will pipe up: "But my English teacher always said /ˈprəʊdʒekt/ not /ˈprɒdʒekt/." One or two admit to being astonished that their former teacher's /vɒrt/ is not always a reliable /wɜːd/.

In their first class of phonetics and phonology, the hundred or so first-year undergraduates embarking on an English degree are always asked if they have been taught English pronunciation at school. Bearing in mind students' reluctance to raise a hand, the next question is: "Who has *not* learned pronunciation at school?" Then follows the penultimate question: "Who has not raised their hands yet?" Since the total number of hands raised always falls far short of the total number of students, the final question is: "Who would like to pass this course?" The first two questions are repeated whereupon the majority now respond. This "ritual" is carried out each year, revealing that English pronunciation is still being given scant regard in schools.

This is not just confirmed verbally; students have provided written feedback too. At the end of the 2014/2015 winter semester Phonetic and Phonology course, thirty-nine first semester students completed an online preliminary questionnaire created specifically for the course (Eval&Go)[1]. The overall aim was to obtain broad feedback on students' experiences and perceptions of learning pronunciation. This information would allow for analysis of, and reflection on, the responses and enable these findings to be incorporated into subsequent phonetics and phonology courses. One prompt was: "Were you taught English pronunciation at school? Give details." The following statements were typical. (All students' comments in the article are *sic erat scriptum,* that is, complete with any orthographical or grammatical errors in the original.)

> "Not much. I think that it is not usual to learn the English pronunciation at primary or secondary school."
> "I just noticed the table of phonetics symbols in our coursebooks (for ability to read new wocabulary), but theachers did not talk about it."
> "I was not taught pronunaciation at all. At primary school did not matter at all. At secondary school we had a teacher who had a perfect English pronunciation and got mad every time we said it wrong. In our books we always had the fonetic symbols how to read words properly. But we have

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[1] Eval&Go Surveys and Questionnaires. Feedback from TUL First year undergraduates taking Phonetics and Phonology. February to March 2015. http://www.evalandgo.com/.

never been taught the pronunciation as like we are now. So now it is
something different for me."

Of the respondents, 67% claimed never to have learned anything about
English pronunciation in their ten or more years of English at school. Only
one student mentioned learning phonemic symbols: "We had an excellent
English teacher at high school (though she was Czech). She introduced the
IPA symbols, she wanted us to listen and repeat a lot."
    Should these thirty-nine responses be indicative of the overall status
of English pronunciation in Czech schools, one cannot but conclude that
learners are expected to somehow absorb pronunciation over time by some
form of osmosis. Alternatively, pronunciation might be given such short
shrift because it is considered low on the scale of teaching priorities.
Czech school teachers may also regard themselves as ill-equipped when it
comes to teaching their pupils English pronunciation. Whatever the reason
for this neglect, Czech learners of English seem to have been left largely to
their own devices when it comes to learning how to pronounce English. As
one student replied: "All my pronounciation skills came from listening
music and watching movies:)." In the Czech classroom then, English
pronunciation appears to receive minimal attention compared to, say, the
other language systems of grammar and vocabulary.

1.2 English pronunciation in Czech school textbooks

English text book developers share some responsibility for the low
priority generally given to pronunciation in the classroom. *New
Chatterbox* (Strange 2006) is a course widely used in Czech schools. The
syllabus is divided up as follows: language (structures), topics and
vocabulary, and skills and functions. As Figure 1 shows, no mention is
made of pronunciation.
    The language here is both highly controlled and graded; no extraneous
structures or lexis are introduced. When it comes to phonology, however,
most course books depart from this rigour. There is no structured
progression in the teaching of pronunciation. Even in books for complete
beginners, teachers and learners alike are immediately confronted with an
assortment of phonological items, few if any of which are adequately dealt
with, let alone explained in either the pupil's or teacher's book.
Accompanying audio material may be available but there is hardly what
may be called *systematic* presentation and practice of what it is to *speak*
English, how to articulate and practise the sounds of the new language.

Unit	Language (structures)	Topic and vocabulary	Skills and functions
New Chatterbox TB Starter Language Coverage			
1	Hello / Hi, Goodbye I'm … Stand up, Sit down, Open your book, Close your book, Look, Listen	Greetings and introductions Classroom language	Saying Hello and Goodbye Introducing yourself Responding to classroom language
2	1–10 What's this? It's a … bag, pen, pencil, rubber, pencil case, book	Numbers 1–10 Classroom objects	Counting to 10 Identifying, naming, and asking about classroom objects
3	This is my … mum, dad, sister, brother Who's this? My …	Members of the family	Identifying, naming, and asking about members of the family

Figure 1. *Starter* Teacher's Book.

A structured approach to teaching the sounds of a language from the very outset is, however, neither innovatory nor unfeasible. In *Orbis Pictus* (1658) Comenius begins, "before all things" with pronunciation, that is to say, "the plain sounds of which man's speech consisteth" (Figure 2). Here, the initial focus is on exercising the tongue, so that it "knoweth how to *imitate*", unlike in the modern classroom, where the training of the articulators is often ignored. Only when this is achieved does the teacher promise: "Afterwards we will go into the *World* and we will view all things." In other words, this bilingual language course begins with phonology and orthography not with lexis.

"Before all things" Comenius introduces the individual "building blocks" of language, the phonemes and graphemes which together form "a lively and vocal alphabet" (Figure 2). This introduction to the alphabet is as succinct as it is effective (Figure 3). Images of familiar animate objects seek to appeal to the seventeenth century young learner's visual senses; well-known sounds are repeated several times; each sound is mapped to the respective letters of the Latin alphabet representing those sounds. The methodology is simple and systematic.

M. Before all things, thou oughtest to learn the plain *sounds*, of which man's *speech* consisteth; which *living creatures* know how *to make*, and thy *Tongue* knoweth how to *imitate*, and thy *hand* can *picture out*.	M. Ante omnia, debes discere simplices *Sonos* ex quibus *Sermo* humanus constat; quos *Animalia* sciunt *formare*, & tua *Lingua* scit *imitari*, & tua *Manus* potest *pingere*.
Afterwards we will go into the *World*, and we will view all things.	Postea ibimus Mundum, & spectabimus omnia.
Here thou hast a lively and Vocal Alphabet.	Hic habes vivum et vocale Alphabetum.

Figure 2. The "syllabus" of *Orbis Pictus* (Comenius 1658, 2).

Figure 3. The first lesson in *Orbis Pictus* (Comenius 1658)[2].

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[2] http://www.uned.es/manesvirtual/Historia/Comenius/OPictus/Pictus003.jpg.

This approach, namely beginning with the individual sounds of a language is not usually taken in L2 English language teaching. L1 and L2 English language learning are not unrelated. The systematic teaching of phoneme-grapheme patterns, that is *phonics,* fell out of favour in the L1 classroom. By the late twentieth century it had all but been replaced by the *look-and-say,* that is the whole-word method. (Similarly, it is whole words which L2 learners of English are confronted with from the first lesson.) While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss English language teaching in the L1 classroom, a brief glance at the issues does provide useful insight for L2 teaching. Lemann (1997) sketches what came to be known as the "Reading Wars" in the United States, thus:

> "Although the whole-language movement began in the early 1970s, the dispute about reading instruction goes back much further. Noah Webster believed in phonics, Horace Mann in the word method. In the late 1920s, as progressive education became an influential movement, schools began to switch from phonics to whole-word reading instruction. The [...] readers [...] are based on whole-word theory: they try to get children to familiarize themselves with a limited set of simple words [...], not to use their knowledge of letters and sounds to decode words they haven't seen before. Rudolf Felsch's scorching 1955 best seller turned the pendulum back toward phonics in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the glory decade for whole-language, the pendulum had swung again."

Phillips (1998, 71) explains: "The belief that children had to be taught the codes before they could derive meaning from words was replaced by the belief that meaning must come first and replace the teaching of codes." The effect this had on British children's literacy was detrimental. As Phillips noted: "Children are being labelled dyslexic and referred to psychologists when all that is wrong with them is that they haven't been taught to read properly" (73). If this is the case in L1 English teaching, how much greater must be the challenges for L2 learners?

In the L1 classroom, there is a return to teaching the phonemes and their corresponding graphemes to young learners of English. In an independent review of the teaching of early reading, Rose (2006, 3) concludes: "It ill serves children to hold them back from starting systematic phonic work. The term 'formal' in the pejorative sense in which phonic work is sometimes perceived in early education is by no means a fair reflection of the active, multi-sensory practice seen and advocated by the review for starting young children on the road to reading." Not to give young learners these basic tools, Rose argues, is to "hold children back." His conclusion is that early education should begin with "systematic phonic work" and entail "active multi-sensory practice."

Interestingly, this is the very approach Comenius had put forward more than three and a half centuries previously in *Orbis Pictus*.

Though teaching synthetic phonics, (mapping phonemes and graphemes) now holds sway in the L1 classroom, it has yet to make inroads in L2 English language teaching. There are some signs of change though. With reference to the series of books for young learners, *New Family and Friends,* OUP's website[3] states: "Phonics is straightforward and fun! Children learn to recognize and produce the sounds of English, the letters that form them and the words that contain them. This means each sound is taught in a way that's easy to understand. The progression is specially written for non-native speakers and is particularly well structured for children who do not use the Roman alphabet."

While attention is here being paid to coding, major challenges still face learner and teacher alike. Though the publisher claims that the approach is "well structured," there is undoubtedly room for improvement. The problem lies not with the teaching of phonics itself but with the selection and organization of particular lexical items. To take just one example, in the *Starter* Class Book (Figure 4), four potential problems for Czechs occur, in the very two words introduced: *cat* and *car*. Firstly, the grapheme <a> represents two different vowels phonemes in *cat* /kæt/ and *car* /kɑː/. Secondly, the short vowel in /kæt/ does not exist in Czech and is particularly difficult to pronounce. Thus it is often replaced by Czechs with the front vowel /e/, which occurs in both the Czech and English phonemic inventories, producing /ket/. (Once the <a> /e/ pattern has been established, it is difficult to eradicate.) Next, initial /k/ is aspirated, unlike in Czech. Lastly, the word-final grapheme <r> is silent in Received Pronunciation (RP), a non-rhotic accent, whereas in Czech it is pronounced. The learners are required to somehow "recognize and produce the sounds of English" while being presented with too much, potentially confusing information.

Far better than *cat* and *car* would be to introduce words which have more in common phonologically as well as orthographically. The minimal pair *cat* and *cap,* for example, would suffice to teach /k/ followed by /æ/. This short vowel could be reinforced with words such as *mat, hat*, and *bat*. Aspiration is a separate aspect of English pronunciation and mastering it can be troublesome for Czechs. To teach this feature, both aspirated and

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[3] Oxford University Press Website, *New Family and Friends* Second Edition. 2015.   https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global//young_learners/family_and_ friends_second_edition/?cc=gr&selLanguage=en&mode=hub.

non-aspirated voiceless plosives could be gradually introduced and practised, either within the same words *kick,* /kɪk/ and *pop,* /pɒp/, or in different words *ten* /ten/ and *tin* /tɪn/ (aspirated)*,* or *dot* /dɒt/ and *sit* /sɪt/ (unaspirated voiceless alveolar plosives). Phonics can indeed be "straightforward" but for this to be the case, greater rigour in structuring the phonological syllabus and selecting appropriate vocabulary would be required. Shortcomings aside, OUP's commitment to teaching phonics in an L2 context is, I believe, a step in the right direction.
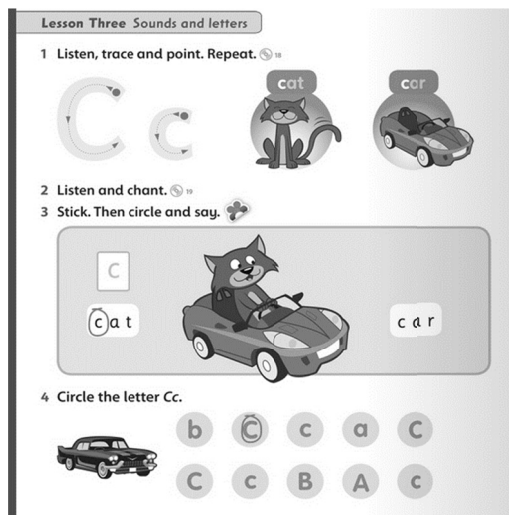
Figure 4. *New Family and Friends.* Starter Class Book Unit 1, p. 2.

Contemporary English course books do not, to my knowledge, start with individual sounds and letters "before all things" as was the approach of Comenius. Rather, the phonemes of English are immediately presented within words or utterances. Any practice which does occur is carried out, usually briefly, within the unit itself. Admittedly, a *grammar* book *Stručná mluvnice angličtiny,* which I recommend to all my students, does begin with a section on pronunciation and spelling (Dušková et al. 1964, 9–39), but this is not so with school *course* books. In a typical contemporary course book, what a learner hears or reads they are called upon to pronounce, without sufficient prior practice of individual sounds. This may occur in the form of sing-along songs, some sounds of which will no doubt be wholly unfamiliar to the Czech ear and tongue.

Pupils learn, for example, that the word for *father* is *dad,* but many students entering university have spent years pronouncing this word as /dɛd/. The problem is that minimal pairs such as *dad* /dæd/ and *dead* /ded/ can cause misunderstandings in certain contexts, as will be discussed later. Even if students become belatedly aware of the <a> /æ/ and <e> /e/ correlation, many have considerable difficulties "unlearning" their pronunciation errors, so ingrained are they. This being the case, clearly any teacher who wishes to teach contrastive aspects of English pronunciation to Czech learners even in an ad hoc way, has a major challenge on their hands.

A primary class book typically contains a sentence like: *Hello, my name's Tom.* The teacher of pronunciation would need to anticipate four pitfalls. First, the English phoneme /h/ is voiceless, not voiced as the Czech glottal fricative [ɦ] is. Then, the grapheme <o> in *hello* represents the RP diphthong /əʊ/not the Czech [oʊ̯]. Next, because of progressive assimilation of voice in English, the <s> in the contraction *name's* is /z/ rather than the phoneme /s/, which would be suggested by the orthography. Finally, initial /t/ is aspirated in English [tʰ], unlike in Czech where it is without aspiration [t˭]. Thus a Czech learner may well say: [ˈɦɛlou ˈmaɪ ˈnɛɪms ˈt˭om] instead of [həˈləʊ maɪ ˈneɪmz ˈtʰɒm]. (Here, square brackets are used for Czech phonemes as well as phonetic transcription of the actual sounds produced in either language; slant brackets are used for the phonemes of RP. This is to distinguish between the representation of such similar vowels as the Czech [o] and the English /ɒ/, as well as non-RP phonemes such as the voiced glottal fricative [ɦ]. The superscript equal sign ˭ is here used to denote the Czech tenuis consonant, in this case the plosive [t˭], which lacks aspiration, in order to contrast it with its aspirated counterpart in English [tʰ].)

Though these errors do not hinder communication, arguably, good pronunciation is taught from the start, particularly at primary level, not later when learners are older, or when they are more proficient at English. Ioup (2008, 46) is not alone in maintaining that "younger is better in terms of acquiring the phonology of an L2." Since a teacher's book often provides little detailed or structured information on pronunciation, teachers have to develop and apply their own knowledge of English and Czech phonology to classroom practice. First and foremost, they must anticipate the problems Czech speakers of English are likely to have. In addition, these phonological problems have to be prioritized. It would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss this issue here; needless to say, not every difference between English and Czech regarding segmental or

suprasegmental phonology is of equal importance in terms of comprehensibility and intelligibility. Since the learner is presented with an array of phonological and phonetic items, from the very first page of the pupil's book, any instructor needs to make informed decisions on what is considered of primary, secondary and of negligible importance in the context of classroom teaching. Next, having anticipated the problems, the teacher will need to pre-teach and practise these. This may entail the creation of specific exercises focused on the mechanics of speech as well as on introducing the main regular grapheme-phoneme patterns. Remedial work, correcting errors in pronunciation, would also need to be carried out, ideally immediately and regularly, little but often. It is hardly surprising then, in light of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, that pronunciation is relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities in the Czech English-teaching classroom.

This article is a modest attempt to address the first of these needs; it introduces those individual English phonemes which typically cause problems for Czech learners of English. Although research has indicated that "prosodic errors appear to be a more potent force in the loss of intelligibility than phonetic errors" (Munroe and Derwing 1995, 285), aspects of connected speech such as stress, rhythm, and intonation, which are often troublesome for Czech speakers, are not dealt with here for reasons of space. The focus is, as it once was, on "the plain sounds of which man's speech consisteth" (Comenius 1658, 2). An explanation of the linguistic terms used here can be found in Roach's Glossary (2011).

1.3 Some remarks on Received Pronunciation

This article deals with the particular accent of English which is used in the majority of classrooms throughout the Czech Republic, Received Pronunciation (RP). This is a term which is not without its detractors. Roach (2009, 3) calls it both "old fashioned and misleading." Describing the same accent, he concludes that "a preferable name is BBC pronunciation." But is such a dismissal of the term RP warranted? Could not the alternative label he suggests be equally if not more "misleading"? The term "BBC pronunciation" would seem limiting since it suggests the accent(s) used by the British Broadcasting Corporation, the national state broadcaster funded by the British taxpayer. It could seem parochial to describe the accent of an Indian PhD student here in the Czech Republic, who has never set foot in Britain, as "BBC pronunciation." RP, on the other hand, is a globally-recognized term for an English accent used by speakers from a host of different nations, cultures, and social backgrounds.

Regardless, the term RP has fallen out of favour with respected British phoneticians. Like Roach, Cruttenden (2014) no longer uses RP even though this term was used in all of the many preceding editions of the book since its first publication in 1962. In the foreword he explains why: "I no longer regard the book as describing RP. Despite the fact that I and other phoneticians have sought to describe changes in RP to make it a modern and more flexible standard, many, particularly in the media, have persisted in presenting an image of RP as outdated and becoming even more than ever the speech only of the 'posh' few in the south-east of England. For this reason I have dropped the name RP and now consider myself to be describing General British or GB" (xvi-xvii). In other words, respected phoneticians cede to the "many, particularly in the media," because these "persisted in presenting an image of RP." The picture the media project is of a minority accent which is both "posh" and "outdated," and which must now be dismissed as an elitist anachronism.

The impression cannot be avoided that an agenda-driven media is putting pressure on academia to fall into line. Phillips (1996, 64) detects an ideology underlying such trends, calling it "fundamentalist egalitarianism." Christophersen (1987) in his robust defence of RP contests that "opposition to élitism, to judge from the way it is often expressed, savours of a degree of intolerance that is reminiscent of fascism." Might not the rejection of the term RP stem more from a desire to adhere to contemporary cultural orthodoxy rather than from rigorous linguistic study itself?

A further criticism is that RP is considered *prescriptive*. The *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur 2005) states its entry under RP thus: "regarded as correct or proper, especially by arbiters of usage." Again, is this a valid argument? The first reference to RP may well be in *On Early English Pronunciation* published in 1869. The author, A. J. Ellis (1869, 1090), explains that *"*the object of the following examination is to determine as precisely as possible the phonetic elements of received English pronunciation." Ellis himself made no claim to the title of "arbiter," quite the contrary, he explains that he is merely *describing* "the pronunciation at present used by educated English speakers without attempting to decide what is 'correct.' That I have not even a notion of how to determine a standard pronunciation, I have already shewn at length (pp. 624–630). We merely wish to know what *are* the sounds which educated English men and women really use when they speak their native language" (1089-1090). Thus Ellis seeks to explain what RP sounds *are,* not what RP pronunciation *should be*. The very person to

whom the coining of the term RP is usually attributed states unequivocally that he is *not* an "arbiter of usage" (McArthur 2005).

In this article, as in my teaching, I *persist* (to use Cruttenden's term if not his conclusion) in retaining the label RP since it remains, I believe, both useful and accurate, especially when it comes to the practicalities of teaching English as a foreign language in a Czech classroom. It distinguishes what is essentially British English from American English, the other principal accent which Czech learners may encounter. At the same time, RP is a supra-local accent; it is not restricted to the accent of Britain, the Queen, let alone the BBC. The British Library website[4] notes that "RP is ... regionally non-specific, that is it does not contain any clues about a speaker's geographic background ... [and] is probably the most widely studied and most frequently described variety of spoken English in the world." While only a fraction of the UK population speaks it, it is an accent which is used all over the globe, a lingua franca among non-native speakers, speaking in myriad contexts and fields. A third important reason for using RP is that this term is used by Czech authors of books on pronunciation such as Melen (2010), or Plavka (1997).

While RP is a *description* of a particular accent, unlike the dialectologist Ellis, in my capacity as a teacher of non-native speakers of English, I employ a strong element of *prescription.* RP is undisputedly an accent of *educated* speakers. The hundreds of learners of English I have taught here in the Czech Republic aspire, without exception it seems, to sounding educated. Never have I encountered a student who is fearful of sounding "posh." Anecdotal evidence gathered from students over the years suggests quite the opposite. Whatever the sociolinguistic or historical reasons for its appeal, not to teach students what is undisputedly perceived to be a "prestige" accent, would be to do them a great disservice. This is not to suggest that what passes today as RP has not changed over the years, neither is RP a geographically uniform accent. A Tamil with an RP accent would not sound identical to a Czech with the same accent. Yet whether Conservative, Mainstream, Contemporary or Modified RP, to name some of the terms mentioned on the British Library website, RP is still instantly recognizable as being, in the broadest of terms, the same accent of English. RP has forty-four individual phonemes which, like Czech, are divided into vowel and consonant sounds. The focus below is on those sounds which Czech learners of English struggle with.

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[4] British Library Website. *Received Pronunciation*. Accessed November 18, 2015. http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/case-studies/received-pronunciation/.

2. The vowels of RP

2.1 Vowel categories

The Czech language contains ten monophthongs, divided into five short and five long vowels. The difference between the short and corresponding long vowel is primarily one of quantity, the latter of each pair being twice as long in duration. Czech has three diphthongs, [au̯], [eu̯] and [ou̯], making a total of thirteen vowel phonemes. English has seven more vowel phonemes, a total of twenty. These are represented on the vowel chart below (Figure 5). The RP vowels are laid out according to the phonemic categories to which they belong.

short vowels				diphthongs
/ɪ/	/e/	/æ/	/aɪ/	/ɪə/
/ʊ/	/ɒ/	/ʌ/	/eɪ/	/eə/
/ə/	/ɑː/	/ɜː/	/ɔɪ/	/ʊə/
/iː/	/ɔː/	/uː/	/aʊ/	/əʊ/

long vowels

Figure 5. The twenty English vowel phonemes.

2.2 Vowel length: differences between Czech and English

Though both languages have short and long vowels, from Figure 5 it is apparent that these are not "paired" in English as the Czech monophthongs are. All five Czech short vowels have the same short quantity. Likewise, the five long vowel phonemes of Czech are quantitatively long. Were a Czech short vowel to be lengthened, it would be perceived as a long vowel and the meaning of the word would be different, as in *pas* [pas] (passport) and *pás* [paːs] (seatbelt). By contrast, English has seven short vowels and five long vowels which do not form short and long equivalents in terms of quantity alone. The differences are in terms of quality too. Compare the

short vowel in *cat* /kæt/ to the long vowel in *cart* /kɑːt/. Quality here means that the shape of the mouth varies according to the position of the tongue and the degree of lip rounding when the vowel is produced. Furthermore, "short" and "long" can be misnomers. All English vowels, regardless of whether they are short or long vowels or diphthongs, can be "clipped" depending upon the phonetic context. That is to say, each of the twenty vowel sounds can vary in *quantity*.

To illustrate, the front close vowels of both languages can be compared: [ɪ] and [iː]. The Czech short vowel [ɪ] and long vowel [iː], differ perceptually in their quantity. Like any Czech short vowel, [ɪ] is measurably of shorter duration than its longer counterpart. The English phonemes /ɪ/ and /iː/, on the other hand, differ in *quality* but they may not always have a different *quantity*.

To illustrate, the duration of these two vowels in different contexts has been measured (Gimson 2000, 96). From this data, Knútsson (2008) constructed the chart in Figure 6. The length of time it takes to pronounce the vowel in the words listed on the left was measured in centiseconds (csec), hundredths of a second.

```
leave   liːv    30.0    ────────────────────────────
lead    liːd    28.5    ──────────────────────────
lea     liː     28.0    ─────────────────────────
lean    liːn    19.5    ─────────────────
leaf    liːf    13.0    ──────────
leap    liːp    12.3    ──────────
live    lɪv     18.6    ───────────────
lid     lɪd     14.7    ────────────
limb    lɪm     11.0    ────────
tiff    tɪf     8.3     ─────
lip     lɪp     7.5     ────
```
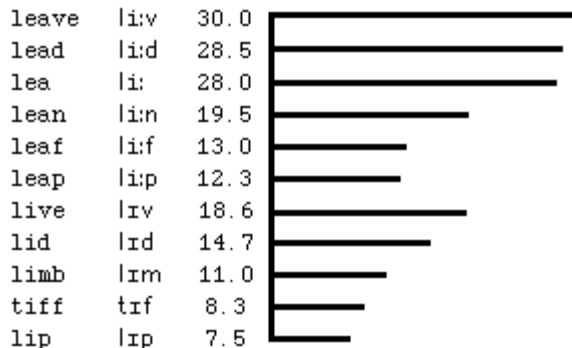
Figure 6. Duration of English vowels in different phonetic contexts (Knútsson, 2008).

From this data, the following observations can be made. Firstly, the long vowel in *leaf* /liːf/ (13.0 csec) is shorter than the short vowel in *live* /lɪv/ (18.6 csec). The reason for this is that the voiceless /f/ shortens the preceding long vowel /iː/ whereas the voiced /v/ gives the short vowel /ɪ/ its full quantity. A Czech may well be surprised that a long vowel can sound shorter than a short vowel. Secondly, when the same consonant

phoneme, whether voiceless such as /p/ (*lip, leap*) or voiced such as /d/ (*lid, lead*), follows a short and long vowel respectively, forming a minimal pair, the former in each pair does in fact have shorter duration than the latter. Thus the long vowel in *lead* /liːd/ (28.5 csec) is almost twice as long as the short vowel in *lid* /lɪd/ (14.7 csec), as would be the case in Czech with the vowels [iː] and [ɪ]. Lastly, word-final long vowels have almost the same duration as those which are followed by a voiced consonant. Thus the vowel in *lea* /liː/ (28 csec) is almost as long as that in *lead* /liːd/ (28.5 csec).

Examples of the comparative lengths of different long vowels can be seen in Figure 7. (LV= long vowel. LV+0 = no phoneme following the long vowel. LV+vd = long vowel followed by a voiced consonant. LV+vs = long vowel followed by a voiceless consonant.)

LV+0	*car*	*rue*	*see*	*bore*	*purr*	*shoe*	**LV full length**
LV+vd	*card*	*rude*	*seed*	*bored*	*purred*	*shooed*	
LV+vs	*cart*	*root/ route*	*seat*	*bought*	*pert*	*chute*	**Clipped**

Figure 7. Length of long vowels: a comparison.

Gimson (2000, 95) summarizes English vowel duration thus: "In accented syllables the so-called long vowels are fully long when they are final or in a syllable closed by a voiced consonant, but they are considerably shortened when they occur in a syllable closed by a voiceless consonant." This feature of suprasegmentals, namely the shortening of vowel phonemes which are immediately followed by voiceless consonants, is not restricted to the monophthongs. Diphthongs too are clipped when they precede a voiceless consonant: *play* and *played* are of similar length, whereas *plate* is shortened.

Figure 8 provides a few more examples for comparison. As with the long vowels, the first two diphthongs in each set of three words are of comparable length; the final word in each set of three contains a qualitatively shorter diphthong. (Dp = diphthong. Dp+0 = no phoneme following the diphthong. Dp+vd = diphthong followed by a voiced consonant. Dp+vs = diphthong followed by voiceless consonant.)

Dp+0	no	rye	mow	scare	pier	joy	Dp full length
Dp+vd	node	ride	mowed	scares	piers	joys	
Dp+vs	note	right	moat	scarce	pierce	Joyce	Clipped

Figure 8. Length of diphthongs: a comparison.
(RP short vowels cannot occur in word-final positions; they can only be followed by a consonant.)

Vowel length is one aspect of English phonology which differs considerably from Czech and is therefore problematic for learners. This is dealt with further under Voicing 3.3.

2.3 Individual vowel phonemes

Returning to the individual phonemes, of the twenty RP vowels, the majority can be articulated by Czechs without difficulty. Compare the words in Figure 9. The difference in pronunciation of such vowels is phonetically so negligible as to not warrant further treatment here. Phonemically, these sets of words are comparable.

English	bit	let	book	boss	part	my	day	boy	foul
Czech	byt	led	buk	bos	pád	maj	dej	boj	faul

Figure 9. Vowels (and consonants) which are similar in both languages.

Even those vowel phonemes which are not part of the Czech inventory such as the three centring diphthongs /ɪə /eə//ʊə/ are seldom troublesome for Czech speakers of English. A detailed examination and comparison of individual Czech and English phonemes, (as well as suprasegmentals), is provided by Skaličková (1964). There are, however,

individual vowel phonemes which Czechs have trouble mastering; these are dealt with below.

2.4 Problematic vowels: an overview

In the vowel chart below (Figure 10), the RP vowels which cause various degrees of difficulty for Czech learners of English are in shaded boxes. The dark boxes contain the "high priority" vowels: /æ/and /ʌ/. Not only do these two phonemes not *exist* in Czech but they are difficult for Czechs to *articulate*. Moreover, mispronunciation can affect meaning and in some contexts interfere with communication. As for the vowels /ə/ and /ɜː/, these two vowels are not Czech phonemes but they are not difficult to pronounce. The difficult arises as a result of the orthographical representation of these sounds, which for Czechs can be misleading. The two vowels /uː/and/əʊ/ are of lower priority. These phonemes can usually be perceived and articulated clearly. However, if the equivalent Czech vowel sound is used, this usually contributes to a noticeably non-native accent of English. These six vowels are dealt with in further detail below in order of priority.

/ɪ/	/e/	/æ/	/aɪ/	/ɪə/
/ʊ/	/ɒ/	/ʌ/	/eɪ/	/eə/
/ə/	/ɑː/	/ɜː/	/ɔɪ/	/ʊə/
/iː/	/ɔː/	/uː/	/aʊ/	/əʊ/

Figure 10. The six "problematic" vowel phonemes.

2.4.1 The short vowel /æ/

This phoneme does not exist in Czech so it can be difficult for Czechs to distinguish /æ/from /ʌ/ in such minimal pairs as *sang- sung, hammer-hummer* and *damp-dump*. The Czech grapheme <a> represents a different short vowel from the sound of the English <a> in common CVC monosyllables such as *cat, ran* and *mad*. The superficial similarity in orthography is misleading for learners. The English *ham* and Czech *ham*

(onomatopoeic word, corresponds to the English *yum,*) contain different short vowels. Czechs sometimes replace /æ/ with a more close front vowel resembling the RP /e/. The vowel in loan words such as *chat* is pronounced [e] in Czech. Some of these words have adopted Czech orthographical conventions, *scanner* has become *skenr; handicap* has an alternative spelling, *hendikep.*

Since RP has both /æ/and /e/ minimal pairs can be formed when a speaker uses the latter instead of the former. Context usually makes meaning clear, as for example when a student told me he had all my documents on his /fleʃ/. Evidently not sporting an enormous tattoo, he surely meant that they were on his /flæʃ/, *flash* (drive). Occasionally, though, communication falters. I once asked a Czech teacher of English how her weekend had been. "I'm so tired," she sighed. "My husband and I had lots of /seks/ in our field." I was unsure how to respond. Should I sympathize with her exhaustion stemming from a weekend of conjugal activities al fresco? "Potatoes," she added, breaking the embarrassed silence. The penny dropped. She and her spouse were worn out because of the /sæks/ (of potatoes) they had been dealing with in their field, *sacks* /sæks/, not *sex* /seks/. Minimal pairs clearly matter.

Even if Czechs are aware of this common <a> /æ/ and <e> /e/ grapheme-phoneme pattern, the /æ/ vowel does present physiological problems for Czechs since the tongue is not used to adopting the position for this English vowel. In a scene from the Czech film *Tmavomodrý svět*[5], an English teacher (Anna Massey, known for her faultless diction) is trying to teach her class of Czech pilots to pronounce the verb *to land*. A young Czech pilot mispronounces it: *to lend*. His Czech friend's tip is: *votevři víc hubu,* (open your gob wider). The expression is crude, yet in terms of articulatory phonetics, faultless:/æ/ is a more open front vowel than /e/. This vowel phoneme, then, is one which needs intensive, regular practice and should not be replaced by either /e/ or /ʌ/.

2.4.2 The short vowel /ʌ/

As regards pronunciation, this phoneme /ʌ/ is not as difficult for Czechs to articulate as /æ/. It is, however, different in quality from the Czech [a] and this needs to be pointed out. Thus the English word *hut* and

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[5] Youtube. *Tmavomodrý svět*. English Lesson. Accessed November 20, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjX4yW4i-rI.