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Fifth International Scientific Conference

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ФИЛОЛОГИЈА, КУЛТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ

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CIP - Каталогизација во публикација
Национална и универзитетска библиотека “Св. Климент Охридски”, Скопје

316.7(062)

МЕЃУНАРОДНА научна конференција филологија, култура и образование (5 ;
2020 ; Штип)

Зборник на трудови / Петта меѓународна научна конференција ФИЛКО
филологија, култура и образование, 8-9 октомври 2020, Штип = Сборник
статей / Пятая международная научная конференция ФИЛКО филология,
культура и образование, 8-9 октября 2020, Штип = Conference proceedings
/ Fifth International scientific conference FILKO philology, culture and
education, 8-9 October 2020, Stip. - Штип : Универзитет “Гоце Делчев”,
2021. - 465 стр. ; 21 см

Трудови на мак., рус. и англ. јазик. - Библиографија кон трудовите

ISBN 978-608-244-787-2

1. Напор. ств. насл.

а) Културологија -- Собири

COBISS.MK-ID 52932613

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СОДРЖИНА / СОДЕРЖАНИЕ / CONTENT

1. Suzana R. Bunčić - ANDRIĆ'S EARLY STORIES WITH ELEMENTS OF ALLEGORY AND SATIRE	13
2. Катерина Видова - ГЛАГОЛСКИОТ ПРИЛОГ ВО УЛОГА НА ПРИЛОШКА ОПРЕДЕЛБА ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК И НЕГОВИТЕ АНГЛИСКИ ПРЕВОДНИ ЕКВИВАЛЕНТИ	19
3. Ана Витанова - Рингачева - СОБИРАЧИТЕ НА МАКЕДОНСКОТО НАРОДНО ТВОРЕШТВО ОД ЦЕПЕНКОВ ДО ДЕНЕС (НА 100-ГОДИШНИНАТА ОД СМРТТА НА МАРКО ЦЕПЕНКОВ)	27
4. Бранка Гривчевска - МОДУЛАЦИЈАТА КАКО ПРЕВЕДУВАЧКА ПОСТАПКА ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ПРЕВОД НА РОМАНОТ „ПАЛОМАР“ ОД ИТАЛО КАЛВИНО	33
5. Сашка Грујовска-Миланова - ИНТЕГРАЦИЈА НА ГЕРМАНИЗМИТЕ ВО МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ЈАЗИК	43
6. Јованка Денкова - СОЦИЈАЛНИТЕ РАСКАЗИ НА АНТОН ПАВЛОВИЧ ЧЕХОВ И БОРИС БОЈАЦИСКИ	49
7. Марија Ѓорѓиева Димова - ИНТЕРДИСКУРЗИВНИТЕ ДИЈАЛОЗИ НА ЛИРИКАТА.....	57
8. Ивана Ѓорѓиева, Александар Нацов - ГАСТРОНОМСКИ КАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ НА ИСТОЧНИОТ РЕГИОН НА СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА.....	69
9. Биљана Иванова, Драгана Кузмановска, Снежана Кирова ПРЕДНОСТИ ПРИ УЗУЧУВАЊЕТО НА СТРАНСКИ ЈАЗИК ОД НАЈМАЛА ВОЗРАСТ	75
10. Билјана Ивановска, Марија Кусевска, Цвета Мартиновска Банде ЈАЗИЧЕН КОРПУС НА МАКЕДОНСКИТЕ ИЗУЧУВАЧИ ПО АНГЛИСКИ И ГЕРМАНСКИ КАКО СТРАНСКИ ЈАЗИЦИ	79
11. Лела Ивановска - КРЕАТИВНОСТА ВО НАСТАВАТА ПО АНГЛИСКИ ЈАЗИК КАКО СТРАНСКИ ЈАЗИК	87
12. Natka Jankova Alagjovska - INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CONGITION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN OUR COUNTRY AND ABROAD	95
13. Сашка Јовановска - УСВОЈУВАЊЕ ВТОР ЈАЗИК- ПЕДАГОШКА ГРАМАТИКА	105
14. Луси Караниколова-Чочоровска - „ПРОСВЕТИТЕЛСТВОТО ВО ЈУЖНОСЛОВЕНСКИТЕ ЛИТЕРАТУРИ“ (ПРЕГЛЕД)	113
15. Карначук Ирина Јурьевна - ПОРЯДОК СЛОВ И ИНВЕРСИЈА КАК СПОСОБИ ВЪРАЖЕНИЯ ЕКСПРЕССИВНОСТИ	119
16. Милена Касапоска-Чадловска - ГРАМАТИКАТА ВО УЧЕБНИЦИТЕ ПО ФРАНЦУСКИ ЈАЗИК ЗА СРЕДНО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ	123
17. Лидија Ковачева - ДЕМОНОЛОШКИТЕ ПРЕТСТАВИ КАЈ АСИРЦИТЕ И БАБИЛОНЦИТЕ	133
18. Славчо Ковилоски - ПРОТОТИПИ НА ЖЕНСКИ ЛИКОВИ ВО МАКЕДОНСКАТА КНИЖЕВНОСТ И ФОЛКЛОРОТ ОД XIX ВЕК	141
19. Весна Кожинкова - РЕФЕРЕНЦИЈАЛНОСТА ВО РОМАНОТ „МЕМОАРИТЕ НА АЛБЕРТ АЛНШТАН“ ОД КИРЕ ИЛИЕВСКИ.....	149

20. Кристина Костова, Марија Крстева, Наталија Попзарјева, Крсте Илиев, Драган Донеv - ДРАМАТА ВО СРЕДЕН ВЕК КАКО ОСНОВА ЗА ОЗНАЧУВАЊЕ НА КУЛТУРНИОТ ИДЕНТИТЕТ ВО АНГЛИЈА	155
21. Мирјана Коцалева, Александра Стојанова, Билјана Златановска, Наташа Стојковиќ - ПРИМЕНА НА РАЗЛИЧНИ МЕТОДИ НА УЧЕЊЕ НА ИНФОРМАТИЧКИТЕ ПРЕДМЕТИ	163
22. Весна Коцева - ГЛАВНИ КАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ НА КОМУНИКАТИВНИОТ ПРИСТАП	169
23. Весна Коцева, Марија Тодорова - ОСНОВНИ НАЧЕЛА НА ПРИРОДНИОТ ПРИСТАП НА КРЕШЕН И ТЕРЕЛ	177
24. Даниела Коцева, Шукрије Барути, Снежана Мирасчиева - ЈАЗИКОТ И ГОВОРОТ ВО ФУНКЦИЈА НА ОПШТЕСТВЕНА И ИНДИВИДУАЛНА АДАПТАЦИЈА	183
25. Даниела Коцева, Снежана Мирасчиева - РЕФЛЕКСИЈАТА НА ОДДЕЛНИ ТЕЛЕВИЗИСКИ СОДРЖИНИ И ПОЈАВАТА НА НАСИЛСТВО КАЈ ДЕЦАТА	191
26. Драгана Кузмановска, Лидија Ристова, Биљана Иванова МОЌТА НА ФРАЗЕОЛОГИЗМИТЕ ВО СВЕТОТ НА РЕКЛАМИТЕ	199
27. Marija Kusevska - WHERE DIRECTNESS AND INDIRECTNESS RESIDE	207
28. Лидија Лумпова - СООТНОШЕНИЕ ГОЛОСА АВТОРА И ГОЛОСОВ ГЕРОЕВ В ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННИХ СИСТЕМАХ ТОЛСТОГО И ДОСТОЕВСКОГО (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ РОМАНА -ЭПОПЕИ Л.Н. ТОЛСТОГО «ВОЙНА И МИР», РОМАНОВ Ф.М. ДОСТОЕВСКОГО «ПРЕСТУПЛЕНИЕ И НАКАЗАНИЕ», «ИДИОТ», «БРАТЪЯ КАРАМАЗОВЫ»)	215
29. Ранко Младеноски - ХИПОТЕКСТОТ ВО ПОЕЗИЈАТА НА БЛАЖЕ КОНЕСКИ	223
30. К.А. Нагина - ТВОРЧЕСТВО Л.Н. ТОЛСТОГО В ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ	233
31. Георгий Недюрмагомедов - ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ МЕТАПРЕДМЕТНЫХ УМЕНИЙ УЧАЩИХСЯ ОСНОВНОЙ ШКОЛЫ В ПРОЦЕССЕ УЧЕБНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ	241
32. Першина Татьяна Ивановна - ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ ПРОЕКТНО-ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬСКОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ОБУЧАЮЩИХСЯ ПО ГЕОГРАФИИ	247
33. Мария Попова - РОЛЬ И ФУНКЦИИ МУЗЕЕВ В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ГУМАНИТАРИЯ	253
34. Vesna Prodanovska-Poposka - ACQUIRING PROPER PRONUNCIATION: AN OVERVIEW OF A SET OF EXERCISES FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH LONG /i:/ AND /u:/ VOWELS	259
35. Цветанка Ристова Магловска, Младен Мицевски ИСКУСТВЕНО УЧЕЊЕ КАКО АЛАТКА ЗА ИНСПИРИРАЊЕ НА УЧЕНИЦИТЕ ВО УГОСТИТЕЛСКОТО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ	265
36. Петја Рогич, Драган Донеv - МИНАТИТЕ ВРЕМИЊА ВО БУГАРСКИОТ И МАКЕДОНСКИОТ ПРЕВОД НА „ВУЈКО ВАЊА“ ОД АНТОН ПАВЛОВИЧ ЧЕХОВ ВО ОДНОС НА МИНАТИТЕ ВРЕМИЊА ВО СРПСКИОТ ПРЕВОД	273

37. Наташа Сарафова - ВЛИЈАНИЕТО НА ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЈАТА И КУЛТУРНИТЕ ПОЛИТИКИ ВРЗ ВИДЛИВОСТА НА НАЦИОНАЛНИТЕ КНИЖЕВНОСТИ (Пример : Норвешка книжевност)	281
38. Наташа Сарафова, Марица Тасевска - АСПЕКТИ НА КНИЖЕВНИТЕ ИНДУСТРИИ ВО НОРВЕШКА	291
39. Simona Serafimovska - STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS AT THE UNIVERSITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA	297
40. Елена Владимировна Сидорова - ЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ОШИБКИ В ПИСЬМЕННЫХ РАБОТАХ УЧАЩИХСЯ	305
41. Александра Стојанова, Мирјана Коцалева, Наташа Стојковиќ, Билјана Златановска - ПРИМЕНА НА VARK МОДЕЛОТ ВО ПРОЦЕСОТ НА УЧЕЊЕ	311
42. Анета Стојановска-Стефанова, Марија Магдинчева-Шопова - ПРЕДИЗВИЦИТЕ ОД ПОЛИТИЧКАТА ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЈА ЗА ДРЖАВИТЕ	319
43. Aleksandra P. Taneska, Blagojka Zdravkovska-Adamova CREATING SYLLABUS AND DEVELOPING GRADING CRITERIA FOR MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE FOR PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES AT SEEU ACCORDING TO NEEDS BASED ANALYSIS	327
44. Ольга Тихонова - И.В. ГЁТЕ КАК КИНОПЕРСОНАЖ: К ПРОБЛЕМЕ ДИАЛОГА ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ И КИНО	337
45. Марија Тодорова, Весна Продановска-Попоска - ГЛАСОВНИТЕ СИСТЕМИ НА ШПАНСКИОТ И НА АНГЛИСКИОТ ЈАЗИК	345
46. Емилија Тодоровиќ - ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ И ПРАКТИКА: УЧЕЊЕ ПРЕКУ РАБОТА-НОВ КОНЦЕПТ ЗА ПРАКТИЧНА ОБУКА ВО ТЕХНИЧКОТО ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ	351
47. Elena Trajanovska, Maja Gjurovikj, Biljana Ivanova - STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION IN ACHIEVING LANGUAGE INTEROPERABILITY	357
48. Nina S. Ćeklić - NARRATIVE-STYLISTIC FEATURES IN THE NOVEL LETTERS TO DANILO KIŠ BY FILIP GAJIĆ	365
49. Уљянова Марина Алексеевна - ГЕНДЕРНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ СЕМАНТИЧЕСКОЙ СТРУКТУРЫ СЛОВА ВЗГЛЯД	373
50. Славица Урумова-Марковска - ПРОСВЕТИТЕЛСКИОТ ЛИК НА СВ. КЛИМЕНТ ОХРИДСКИ ВО ПРЕДАНИЈАТА И ЛЕГЕНДИТЕ	383
51. С.Н. Филошкина, Ж.А. Борискина - АВТОР В ПУБЛИЦИСТИЧЕСКОМ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИИ (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ КНИГИ Г. ГРИНА “Getting to Know the General. The Story of an Involvement”, 1984.)	391
52. Наталија Хабарова - АНГЛИЙСКИЕ ЗАИМСТВОВАНИЯ В СРЕДСТВАХ МАССОВОЙ ИНФОРМАЦИИ	397
53. Ольга Швецова - ЯЗЫКОВЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ «ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКОЙ ПОЭМЫ» А.С. МАКАРЕНКО	407
54. Васко Шутаров - КУЛТУРА И КУЛТУРНА ДИПЛОМАТИЈА ВО ВРЕМЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЈА	415

ACQUIRING PROPER PRONUNCIATION: AN OVERVIEW OF A SET OF EXERCISES FOR IMPROVING ENGLISH LONG /i:/ AND /u:/ VOWELS

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Abstract

Acquiring proper pronunciation is crucial to improving speaking as a skill. Regardless of lexical and grammatical errors, students with understandable pronunciation are still able to communicate efficiently. One of the problems for Macedonian EFL students is their poor quality of English long vowels as the Macedonian language contains only short vowels. Long vowels are not completely new to Macedonian native speakers since the plural of some verbs in Macedonian is formed with geminated vowels - two short vowels of the same quality one next to the other (for example, the verb 'search' in Macedonian is 'пребарува' in the singular and 'пребаруВААт' in the plural form). Even so, students seem to be mostly unaware of them. Therefore, such mispronunciation leads to miscommunication. This paper presents an overview of a set of exercises, mainly focused on improving two long English vowels /i:/ and /u:/, which according to the author's research were shown to be one of the problematic areas in English pronunciation among Macedonian students. These exercises were presented to two groups of students majoring in English Philology and Tourism and Business Logistics at Gotse Delchev University of Shtip, Macedonia.

Keywords: *EFL, English vowels, proper pronunciation, speaking skills*

Introduction

Speaking as a skill is an inevitable segment in Second Language Acquisition, accompanied with the other three language skills, listening, reading and writing. It is well known that listening and reading are "passive" i.e. receptive skills, considering the fact that the learner does not necessarily need to produce language, which is opposite to speaking and writing which are regarded as "active" i.e. productive skills. Pronunciation is one of the speaking sub-skills in SLA is not just about listening and repeating, as it includes grammar and vocabulary as well as speaking and listening skills¹. According to (Goh and Burns 2012: 54 - 66) Second language speaking competence includes core speaking skills, which as a sub-skill entails production of pronunciation, performing speech functions (requests, offers etc.), interaction management, discourse organisation of extended spoken texts.

Acquiring proper pronunciation is crucial in improvement of the speaking as a skill. Regardless of the lexical and grammatical errors students with understandable pronunciation are yet able to communicate efficiently. One of the problems for Macedonian EFL students is their poor quality of English long vowels as the Macedonian language contains only short vowels, even though that English as a foreign language

¹ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/teaching-pronunciation-more-just-listen-and-repeat>

is widely learned and taught in Macedonia for more than 50 years now. There are several factors that influence the pronunciation of EFL Macedonian learners. First and the most noticeable are their use and production of sounds that are specific to their native language and fully different in English. For example long vowels do not appear in Macedonian language, but still, two identical vowels appear such as within a verb or in formation of plural of particular nouns. Hence, long vowels are not completely new to Macedonian native speakers since the plural of some verbs in Macedonian is formed with geminated vowels - two short vowels of the same quality one next to the other (for example, the verb 'search' in Macedonian is 'пребарува' in the singular and 'пребаруваААт' in the plural form). Even so, students seem to be mostly unaware of them.

Methodology

According to results of a previously conducted research as part of the author's PhD dissertation, the long English vowels /i:/ and /u:/ were shown to be one of the problematic areas in English pronunciation, reported among two groups of Macedonian tertiary level students, majoring in different fields. Therefore, in order to overcome such insufficiency, a set of exercises were presented and applied to two target groups of students (in equal manner), one group majoring in English Philology and the other in Tourism and Business Logistics, both at Gotse Delchev University of Shtip, Macedonia. The set of exercises was organized within the timeframe of 4 weeks i.e. in four separate sessions which were additionally scheduled apart from the usual workload according to the student's obligatory lessons & practical classes.

Target groups

The target groups that participated in conducting of the practical work, whose aim was overcoming the pronunciation insufficiencies, were students from two different faculties. **The first group** was consisted of 119 first-year students, majoring in English Philology, enrolled in the second semester, with acquired B1 level of English, successfully completed the first semester and passed the one-semester exam of a mandatory course - English Phonetics. **The second groups** were consisted of 119 second-year students, majoring in Tourism and Business Logistics, enrolled in the fourth semester, with acquired B1 level of English, successfully completed three semesters and passed English language courses 1 and 2, mandatory courses from the first and the second semester.

The teaching method

The practical work was consisted of four main sets of exercises, presented as four stages. The set of main tasks was organized in the following order: Introduction and pronunciation of problematic vowel, exercising with minimal pairs, practicing tongue twisters and reading texts segments aloud, whereas the aims are:

- to pay special attention to the pronunciation of the long and short [i:] and [u:] vowels;
- to increase student's awareness of the correct manner of pronunciation
- to provide opportunity for practicing pronunciation of these sounds through various types of activities and exercises.

Stage one

The first set of exercises aimed for introduction and pronunciation instruction of the long and short versions of “u” and “i” entails three tasks with duration of 30 minutes, with and materials used from internet resources. In the first task from the first set, the instructor introduces the vocal organs through a picture with an explanation of the pronunciation of the particular sounds [u:]” & [i:]. Students then watch an instructional video of how certain phonemes are pronounced. Within the second task, the instructor introduces the students with the sounds again by presenting a picture illustrating the movement and position of the vocal organs within the act of pronunciation. The instructor also shows and explains the position of the articulator- the tongue, during the pronunciation of the vowels [u:] and [i:]. In the third task, students are required to provide an example words that contain [u:] and [i:].

The materials used for this set of exercises are:

- Videos for Long U sound. How to teach reading with phonics https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_s1eBCtaiE English Pronunciation of Long E sounds-EE /i:/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrywqxrFsXI>
- The activities used were taken from the books by Kelly (*How to Teach Pronunciation*) and Kenworthy (*Teaching English Pronunciation*)

The main purpose of the first activity is to provide the students with the opportunity to practice and improve the problematic areas and use and practice them as isolated sounds consequently gaining control over the sounds they produce. Due to the fact that the activities were considered as playful and fun, the students were actively involved from the very beginning. Even more, these activities helped them overcome the initial fear of mispronunciation. Subsequently, after the introductory part of the activities, the students seemed calmer and more aware about pronunciation.

Stage two

The second set of exercises- minimal pairs for the long and short ‘ i ’ and ‘ u ’ vowels includes exercises containing 4 tasks with duration of 45 minutes .The materials used for this set of exercises is from the text book by *Ann Baker; Ship or Sheep? An Intermediate Pronunciation Course*. The first material comprises information solely on the minimal pairs for short ‘ I ’ and ‘ u ’ according the International Phonetic Alphabet by Alfred Charles Gimson, i.e. /I/ & /ʊ/. The second material provides exercises of words containing the long IPA variants of the aforementioned vowels i.e. /i:/ and /u:/ according to A. C. Gimson. The handouts with the minimal pairs (as a first task of the set) are distributed to the students first and they are required to read it on their own. In the second task the group participants repeat the word examples together and at the end they repeat the examples separated in pairs. For the third task the students receive additional material containing simple sentences with words which they have already been exercising with beforehand. First the participants listen to the sentence recordings and then the students are expected to repeat those sentences on their own. As for the last portion of the third task, one of the students who voluntarily decides to speak out, reads the sentence and the rest of the group is guessing which word is pronounced i.e. whether it contains [u:] or [i:]. In the fourth task the participants are given handouts with simple sentences containing the words they have already practiced with. First, the participant listen the sentence recordings and then the participants are required to practice with the sentence independently.

The materials used for this set of exercises are:

- <http://www.lmoda.net/english/minpairs/>
- Copies and CD materials: Baker, Ann. Ship or Sheep? An Intermediate Pronunciation Course. Third Edition. Cambridge University Press. page 3-10
- Dialogue 1. Unit 1 page 4 - Baker, Ann. Ship or Sheep? An Intermediate Pronunciation Course. Third Edition. Cambridge University Press.
- Dialogue: Unit 14 page 41 - Baker, Ann. Ship or Sheep? An Intermediate Pronunciation Course. Third Edition. Cambridge University Press.

The ‘minimal pairs’ sequences are used to raise the students’ awareness of the pronunciation and discrimination of the problematic sounds. During the second stage, the students were reviewing materials on the actual vowels in order to establish correct pronunciation and focus on it. The third stage was to realize the difference the vowels similarities, which easily may become a base for mispronunciation. The students did not indicate any burden caused during the exercise stages. Those activities were aimed to provide the students practice as much as possible and help them improve their pronunciation as well as to show them the significance of intelligibility and comprehension in communication, whereas incorrect pronunciation can easily lead to misunderstanding between interlocutors.

Stage Three

The third set of exercises- the tongue twisters with long and short [I] and [ʊ] sounds contain exercises with duration of 45 minutes, organized in three separate tasks. As for the materials, the author used internet resources i.e. two websites and a detailed explanation of the tasks. Firstly, the instructor gives the handouts which are individually reviewed while a listening material (recordings) is reproduced. In the second task the participants attentively listen to the instructor reading example words. Afterwards, the students are asked to read out aloud individually. As for the third task, the students, separated in pairs, are requested to read the tongue twisters aloud.

Materials used for the set with tongue twisters are:

- <http://cylareashea.blogspot.com/2010/09/short-u-and-long-u.html>
- http://thesmallguidesite.com/tonguetwister/tonguetwister_longi.html

The ‘tongue twisters’ set focus on the correct pronunciation and help the participant improve their speaking skills. The second stage provides the students the opportunity to carefully listen to the sentences over and over again, so they could correct the incorrect utterances. As for the third stage, the students had to focus on the impeccable pronunciation due to the fact that the examples contain not only vowels that are the subject aimed for improvement, but their similar variations as well. By practicing the tongue twisters the aim to help students realized the importance of the correct pronunciation especially for the correct transfer of the meaning of what is said, has been achieved. The tongue twisters which turned out to be the most entertaining exercises positively influence on the correct pronunciation in a pleasant manner.

Stage Four

The fourth set of exercises- reading aloud using long or short variant of ‘u’ and ‘I’, were organized for duration of 45 minutes, divided into three separate tasks. As for the materials, the instructor used Internet resources, such as texts and lists with

words containing the actual vowels, along with a detailed explanation of the tasks. In the first one, the instructor prepares the texts and reads them aloud only once. In the second task, the words from the lists are written on the board, whereas the students read and repeat together. Further on, the students are given a full text, i.e. two texts, which they read and repeat them as pair work. In the third task each student, voluntarily or chosen randomly, reads the text and gets a comment by the instructor regarding the errors he made. This is the final task from the fourth set of exercises aimed for practice and improvement of the problematic vowels ('i' & 'u') and their long/ short variants.

Materials used for the 'reading aloud' set of exercises are:

- Dialogues and texts used for this set of exercises (reading aloud) are:
- http://www.eslgold.com/pronunciation/u_versus_oo.html
- Story 1: <http://www.funfonix.com/book4/story.jpg>

The exercise with 'reading aloud' is quite complex and therefore it was included as the very last of the four stages. Reading text provided the students the opportunity to work on their pronunciation as a whole, because the texts contain not only the problematic but also other vowels, similar to the problematic. At this stage it is extremely important to provide the students appropriate and constructive response and assessment of their work, because as stated before, students are not able to assess their own pronunciation. The inability to evaluate one's own pronunciation can lead to erroneous assumptions about the success not only in performing a task but the success in general. Using texts and dialogues as reading materials diverts the students from repetitions and exercising as their task is to pay attention in the meaning of the texts and the dialogues.

Results

After the conducted practical work with both groups of students the following results were gained:

- The anticipated sets of exercises upon each stage which were conducted to both groups were performed parallelly and at an accurately determined period of time and without any evident burden throughout the period of their duration.
- Both groups of participants have shown a significant level of improvement not only regarding the problematic areas but regarding their overall pronunciation. Apart from the correct pronunciation, the additional practice has helped the students in gaining more confidence and ease when leading a conversation in English.
- The pronunciation level for both groups of students, regarding the problematic areas (long and short variants of 'i' and 'u') has been improved such as approximately in 15% for the group majoring in English Philology and approximately in 50% for the students majoring in Tourism and Business Logistics.

Conclusion

The practical work for *Introduction and pronunciation of problematic vowel*, exercising with *minimal pairs*, practicing *tongue twisters* and *reading texts segments aloud*, was conducted cooperatively and was oriented towards achieving progress which was noticeable in both groups, resulting with high degree of responsibility

in context of the learning process organized outside of the compulsory workload. Improvement of the existing errors in pronunciation and the speaking skill in general has shown to be feasible and achieved by engaging additional time and effort within the semester workload. According to further statistical findings, the pronunciation insufficiencies can be overcome by 10-15% to students of English Philology and by about 50% to students at the Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics.

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