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Gdańsk, 20.04. 2021

**The review report on the habilitation thesis of Mgr. Renáta Timková, PhD titled: SUPRASEGMENTALS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION WITH FOCUS ON SLOVAK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH presented at PAVOL JOZEF ŠAFÁRIK UNIVERSITY IN KOŠICE, FACULTY OF ARTS.**

The manuscript titled SUPRASEGMENTALS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION WITH FOCUS ON SLOVAK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH, HABILITATION THESIS presented to me in a PDF format consists of 106 pages, including literature and an appendix on which the empirical part of one of the chapters is based.

The reader does not get the idea from the work whether it is an original monograph or the presentation of selected research and publications in the career of the Applicant. There is an uneven distribution of research problems (I do not necessarily mention it in a derogatory sense) and the way they are effectuated. It is worth mentioning that the thesis basically presents the results of the undertaken research. Most of the chapters, with the exception of the last one, are scarcely supported with theoretical considerations to build the solid ground for the research. **This is totally justified if the thesis is not a monograph but the presentation of research achievements.** The work seems to incorporate various academic perspectives in the search of phonological interference of an L1. The issues in subsequent chapters are considered from the purely linguistic point of view, a SLA perspective and, more importantly, from the point of view of foreign language pedagogy. The perspectives are mixed altogether.

### **The construction of the habilitation thesis**

The work consists of an introduction in which the Author articulates the basic problem undertaken by the thesis and initially defines crucial issues with reference to literature. Thereby,

it is stated that the central topic of the work is the issue of phonological interference of the Slovak phonological system on the process of language acquisition of English as an L2 by Slovak language learners and presumably communication effectiveness in this language by the target group of learners. In defining communicative intelligibility, a goal in itself, the Author makes references to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to pinpoint the elements which constitute the part of phonological competence of an L2 learner and the way they correlate with different language levels. This basically empirical work, in the Author's words, has two objectives: "to explore the selected aspects of prosodic interference from L1 (Slovak language) to L2 (English language)" and "to investigate learner attitudes towards pronunciation learning and teaching based on learners' perceptions of pronunciation development within both instructed (classroom) language learning and naturalistic language acquisition". The Author makes it clear that her research is based on the theory of language interference introduced by Sabol (1993) and his study serves as a theoretical framework for the ongoing research in second language acquisition on the phonic level. In particular, the Author of the thesis accentuates the part of the theory which postulates that "the completion of the interference process at the phonic level comes only at the point when an 'alien' phonic phenomenon, element (segment/suprasegment), contradictory relationship, distribution, or combination principle of the primary system penetrates the intra-lingual zone of the secondary system, namely through the layer of first level abstractions, (phone, intone) to the layer of second-level abstraction, into its phonematic (intonematic) structure".

**In chapter two** (I include a comment regarding chapter numbering below) titled "Phonological competence in second language acquisition" the author presents reports on the survey results of the EFL university students' attitudes to their learning experience in developing their English pronunciation awareness with the aim of getting an insight into students' perception of the process of learning and teaching phonological aspects. The reported research is of a perceptive nature, based on a questionnaire delving into students experiences and opinions with the target group being the first-year students of British and American studies at the Faculty of Arts of Pavel Jozef Šafárik University.

**Chapter three** presents the results of a diagnostic pronunciation test to identify pronunciation problems of the target group. The study is based on a ready-made test included in the publication by Hancock, M. 2003. *English Pronunciation in Use*, Cambridge University. The author interprets students problems as derived for the influence of the mother tongue, i.e. a strong influence of Slovak. The chapter concludes with the recommendation for the

improvements of teaching phonological issues to Slovak language students to enhance the acquisition of English as an L2.

In the subsequent **chapter (four)** the reader is confronted with the problem of word stress as one of suprasegments. The study is based on two lists of identical words to be marked by testees. Firstly, the testees were asked to define the accented syllable while reading, and later on they were supposed to cover the same task again but with the help of a recoding. The Author reports research findings carried out on two groups of students: 30 post-entry bachelor students and 30 master degree students. The objective for this part of study was to check out whether phonological competence of the tested students matches the expectation of a master's degree graduate.

The **last chapter** delves into the problem of comparing intonation pattern in Slovak and English and find out how intonation patters of native speakers of English are realized by Slovak students. This part is the most extensive one an it is supported with literature review on defining intonation and its place in language learning.

### **Positive remarks pertaining to the thesis**

The author makes her research methodology very explicit, it accompanies each researched item presents in subsequent chapters. She also clearly presents the target group and objectives for each step of her research.

The presented research is quite extended (it pertains to various aspect of suprasegmentals) and delved into from various perspectives. Additionally, different parts of the research survey pertain to different thematic areas (students personal opinions, learning environment, students' experiences in learning pronunciation and teachers' practices perceived by students). The Author takes care of research representativeness by showing that her respondents originally come different regions even if they are students of one university.

Research findings are presented visually in a graphic way and this helps the reader to follow the text

The applied methodology is both qualitative and quantitative (respondents' comments are welcome and analysed in the work). This way the Author allows for research triangulation.

The findings are well-documented and the researchers claims are substantiated with proper evidence, even if it is very surprising for me as a reviewer, since my research indicated a general

tendency among students to swerve away from native-like language use among students, which is the sign of their Critical Language Awareness. The difference may consist in the fact that Slovak students represented in the research are prospective language teachers (if it is the case it should be accentuated in the work).

Taking into account the diversity of the version of English (accents), the Author makes it clear which version is being considered in a particular test and cites professional literature which justifies the use of the test in a general sense, regardless of the version of English preferred by students. For example, considering intonations patterns the author justly mentions that “the British and American frameworks of intonation analysis are not entirely opposed” (p. 56).

The Author seems to be well-acquainted with the shortcomings of the methodologies presented in different chapters by presenting discussions and referring to professional publications.

### **Doubts and recommendations for improvements**

The work starts with chapter two, there is no chapter one (this is an introduction) I would recommend different ordering, since it is very misleading. The titles of all the chapters are also misleading (they may be justified as thematic fields if this is not a monograph). For example, my expectations as a reader were different regarding the content of the chapter. It does not present the issue of phonological competence but rather students' attitudes towards the issues of learning and teaching related issues.

The author should make it clear whether the work is written from the perspective of the methodology of language teaching or the psycholinguistic perspective of second language acquisition. I have a premonition that language acquisition in the paper equals language teaching and language learning. They are two different issues. Language teaching may have an influence on language acquisition (a psycholinguistic process but cannot be considered as a synonym). In my opinion, the work presents an unwitting switch of perspectives. Implications very often pertain to potential pedagogical practices.

The reader is sometimes confused whether the responders of the questionnaire survey were first-year students (p. 15) or third year students (p. 16).

Generally, the work is written well, however there are some stylistic or lexical imperfections causing ambiguities, e.g. “... the questionnaire analysis results helped us gain insight into teachers' English language in English language lessons” (p. 20). Sometimes, there is an

imprecise use of terminology, the use of the phrase: “the lower number of completed questionnaires” instead of “questionnaires’ return rate”, the use of articles, for example “a teacher” instead of a generic use of “the teacher” to stand for the whole group (p. 20).

Certainly, the problematic areas are minor and result from the length of the work or from the fact that Applicant does not define the habilitation patch in her work.

### **General evaluation**

The work is academically valuable. It is based on solid research and moderate drawing of conclusions, which is the sign of academic maturity of the Researcher, who applied the concept of hedging in interpreting her academic findings. The research presented in various chapters is well-planned, designed according to academic rigour. All aspects of research are thematically tuned into the transversal idea of deeper understanding and pedagogical facilitation of the acquisition of phonological aspects of the English language by students who major in English. The methodology applied for various steps of the research is academically viable (The researcher seems to be well-acquainted with professional literature and research tools applied in the field of phonetics) and properly justified by the imperfections or omissions in former research as well as by pedagogical observations of the Researcher, who at the same time is a teacher practitioner. The latter fact additionally validates the presented research (the researcher is an insider, not the outsider in the field). Generally speaking, the work reads well and despite minor imperfection, it is comprehensible, logical and internally coherent.

I hereby express **my positive opinion of Dr. Renáta Timková’s habilitation thesis and propose that she should be admitted to further stages of the habilitation process.**