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Lyrics as a means of raising phonetic awareness: Transcription, pronunciation, and descriptive phonetics combined

Marta Nowacka
University of Rzeszow

The present study assessed an intervention aimed at increasing phonetic awareness among 95 university English non-majors through self-selected songs. It was primarily designed to boost the students' interest and raise the attractiveness of a course of descriptive phonetics (Nowacka, 2022). The focus is twofold: to show how the students performed the tasks and to exhibit how useful they found the approach. Data collection consisted of three consecutive tasks: 1) transcription of lyrics used for reading aloud; 2) analysis of the occurrence of 51 phonetic and morphophonemic features; and 3) the students' evaluation of the attractiveness and usefulness of the activity to improve their understanding of phonetic theory.

The results show that the identification of some features was difficult. Among the issues which require further classroom intervention are: /ŋ/ followed by /g/, aspiration, <-s> forms pronounced as /-ɪz/, KIT vowel, spread vowels, centring diphthongs, and schwa spelt <o>, <u>, and <a>. Nonetheless, the respondents found this activity (extremely) attractive (71%), (extremely) useful (76%) and more attractive than other phonetic tasks (49%). It was praised for the autonomy it offered in the choice of a text/song for analysis and for the practical application of phonetics.

Keywords: lyrics, phonetic awareness, descriptive phonetics, transcription



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1 Introduction

Songs have been recognised as a teaching tool in EFL for the enhancement of various skills, including pronunciation (Barrett, 2015; Hancock, 1999; Murphy, 2013; Tegge, 2018; Walker, 2006). Research on the use of songs for the improvement of pronunciation shows that singing-based intervention and focus on form positively affect pronunciation in general (Wilcox, 1995), as well as the enunciation of words (Baills et al., 2021; Saldiraner & Cinkara, 2021). The articulation of vowels has been shown to improve (Good et al., 2015) and also consonants, for example: consonant clusters by Japanese speakers (Nakataa & Shockey, 2011); final /k, g, t, d/, /l, r/ and /s, z/ by Thai speakers (Kanlayanee, 2012); dental and palato-alveolar fricatives by Indonesians (Aini et al., 2013; Stefani et al., 2015); and /θ/ and /ŋ/ by Czechs (Wodecki, 2014). Improvements in some connected speech phenomena have also been documented, such as linking by Czechs (Wodecki, 2014), as well as in relation to prosody (Degrave, 2021), fluency and naturalness of Iranians (Ashtian & Zafarghandi, 2015), aspiration and fluency of reading by Italians (Tizian, 2016), and new word segmentation by French speakers (Schön et al., 2008).

The present paper focuses on the use of transcribed lyrics in order to revise English phonetics, which, to the author's best knowledge has not yet been a target of phonetic research. A pragmatic intention behind the design of this study was to revise selected features of English phonetics by means of an out-of-class assignment at the end of the first semester, after studying segmental phonetics. The aim was to more actively engage the first-year university English students in self-study and to show them that their understanding of English and recognition of a speaker's accent could benefit from a detailed phonetic analysis of transcribed lyrics of their own choice. It was also an attempt to make the compulsory course of descriptive phonetics more entertaining, because it was perceived as being boring and useless in practical life (Nowacka, 2022).

2 Research methodology

2.1 Research questions

The study aims to answer two questions: the first regarding the students' performance of the task and the second concerning its attractiveness and usefulness.

RQ1: What phonetic features do the students identify correctly in their transcriptions of self-selected lyrics and what features are they still unable to exemplify at the end of the first semester of segmental phonetics?

RQ2: How attractive and useful do the participants find the approach?

2.2 Participants

The respondents were 95 first-year (19–20 years old; M = 29, F = 66) English students of the University of Rzeszow, Poland, at the end of a compulsory 45-hour phonetic training on segmental phonetics. The training included 15 hours of lectures and a 30-hour practical pronunciation course. They had no prior knowledge of suprasegmental phonetics, which started in the second term. All participants were coded S.1–S.95 for anonymity.

2.3 Instruments

The data was collected by means of three different tasks which were part of the obligatory, one-semester, English segmental phonetics and pronunciation course. The tasks were performed on the Microsoft Teams platform. They included:

1. Task 1 – transcription of the lyrics of a self-selected song.
2. Task 2 – a questionnaire used to analyse the occurrence of 51 phonetic and morphophonemic features in the lyrics text.
3. Task 3 – a questionnaire used to evaluate the attractiveness and usefulness of the activity using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not attractive/useful at all; 2 = not very attractive/useful; 3 = neither attractive/useful nor unattractive/useless; 4 = attractive/useful; 5 = extremely attractive/useful). The questionnaire also included open questions:
 - What did you learn from this activity? Why was it useful?
 - Did you find this activity more attractive than other phonetic activities? Why?
 - What was attractive about the activity?
 - What did you not like about this activity?

2.4 Procedure

Task 1 was conducted first. The students were asked to prepare their transcriptions but were allowed to consult online applications, such as Photransedit¹ or others. Then, in the classroom these transcriptions were used as a warm-up exercise in reading aloud from transcription.

The core part of the study (Task 2) focused on students' ability to identify words with selected vowels, consonants, connected speech phenomena, inflected and derived forms, letter-to-sound correspondences, proper names, non-grammatical forms, as well as non-standard and accent-specific variants (see Table 1). The scope of the analysis was wide, consisting of 51 phonetic and morphophonemic features. As a revision the students were asked to analyse their transcribed texts, correct them if necessary, and to analyse them by searching for these 51 pronunciation features. This task was carried out to put the students' theoretical knowledge into practice.

Table 1

Pronunciation Features Analysed in Students' Transcriptions

Feature type	Pronunciation feature
Vocalic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- five pure vowels: FLEECE, KIT, NURSE, TRAP, LOT²- schwa³ spelt as <a>, <o> and <u>- centring diphthongs or a corresponding monophthong /-ɪr, -er, -or/

¹ Photransedit is available at <http://www.photransedit.com>

² These are Wells' (1982, p. 120) standard lexical sets for English vowels: FLEECE: /i:/, KIT: /ɪ/, NURSE: /ɜ:/, TRAP: /æ/, and LOT: /ɒ/. They are used as keywords in the main text.

³ The keyword commA: /ə/ (Wells, 1982, p. 120) has been replaced by the more widely known term schwa, which is used in the main text.

Feature type	Pronunciation feature
Consonantal features	- triphthongs (e.g., <i>nowadays</i> as /'nauədeɪz/) or a smoothed version of (e.g., /'nædeɪz/)
	- three types of vowels: spread, central, and low
	- final voiced obstruents
	- aspiration
	- rhoticity/non-rhoticity
	- dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/
Connected speech features	- /ŋ/ followed and not followed by /g/
	- dark [ɪ]
	- contracted, weak, and strong forms
Inflected and derived forms	- linking and/or intrusive /r/
	- the article <i>the</i> and the preposition <i>to</i> before a vowel and a consonant
	- plurals of nouns, possessives, 3rd person singular present tense <-s> forms pronounced as /s/, /z/, /ɪz/
	- past tenses and past participles <-ed> forms pronounced as /t/, /d/, /ɪd/
Spelling-to-pronunciation patterns	- present participles <-ing> forms pronounced as /ɪŋ/ or /ɪn/
	- the letter <i> as KIT vowel
	- <a> before a consonant as TRAP vowel
	- <ea> or <ee> as FLEECE vowel
	- <(w)or> as NURSE vowel
	- <oo> as GOOSE vowel
	- <ar> as START vowel
- <or> as STRUT or NURSE vowels	
Other	- a suffix <-ate> as /-ət/ in nouns or adjectives or /-eɪt/ in verbs
	- a suffix <-ous> as /-əs/
	- proper names
	- non-grammatical forms
	- non-standard and accent-specific pronunciation

In the follow-up part (Task 3) conducted at the end of the course, the students were required to evaluate how attractive and useful the task was for learning and understanding English phonetics and in comparison with other phonetic activities.

Respondents were also encouraged to provide from one to three words corresponding to a given feature, and for data analysis these were categorised into four types: right, wrong, both right and wrong, and not applicable and/or not provided. For example, the answers regarding <-ed> forms of regular verbs pronounced as /d/ were classified as one of the following options:

- right – e.g., *discovered* /dɪ'skʌvəd/, *ruled* /ruːld/, *begged* /begd/;
- wrong – e.g., *begged* /'beɡed/, *bored* /'bɔːred/.

The 'right and wrong' category was used when students gave both in a single answer, e.g., *bored* /bɔːd/ and /'bɔːred/.

3 Data analysis and results

3.1 Songs chosen by students

Regarding the choice of a singer or band and their accent, 95 respondents opted for mainly British or American artists. There is a slight preference for British ($n = 49$) over American ($n = 40$) English. Among the remaining six replies respondents listed two Australians and Canadians, one singer with German English, and one with Korean English.

Altogether 86 different lyrics were chosen by 95 respondents, with Adele's ($n = 8$) and Ed Sheeran's ($n = 5$) songs the most frequently selected (see Appendix). Adele's lyrics included: Set Fire to the Rain ($n = 3$), Hello ($n = 2$), Someone Like You ($n = 1$), When We Were Young ($n = 1$), and Chasing Pavements ($n = 1$). Ed Sheeran's list included: Thinking out Loud ($n = 2$), Bad Habits ($n = 1$), Castle on the Hill ($n = 1$), and I See Fire ($n = 1$).

3.2 Results

In general, the results are optimistic. Six features, marked in grey in Table 2, constituted over 90% of correct answers, for instance, FLEECE (98%), LOT (98%), TRAP (97%), weak forms (95%), voiced dental fricatives (93%), and contractions (92%). This suggests that the vast majority of the respondents had no difficulty in exemplifying these terms. In order to emphasise those features which require further practice in the classroom, the results in Table 2 are arranged in ascending order of wrong answers.

Table 2

Percentage of Responses for Each Pronunciation Feature (All Data)⁴

Pronunciation feature	right %	wrong %	right and wrong %	not applicable / not provided %
FLEECE	98%	0%	2%	0%
NURSE	75%	0%	6%	19%
/ŋ/ not followed by /g/	80%	0%	0%	20%
<ar> = START	57%	0%	0%	43%
<-ous> as /əs/	13%	0%	0%	87%
KIT	59%	1%	40%	0%
TRAP	97%	1%	1%	1%
LOT	98%	1%	0%	1%
to before C	77%	1%	3%	19%
contractions	92%	1%	0%	7%
<-s> forms as /z/	73%	1%	3%	23%
<-ing> forms as /ɪŋ/	80%	1%	7%	12%
voiced dental fricatives	93%	2%	4%	1%
weak forms	95%	2%	0%	3%
<-ed> forms of reg. v. as /t/	32%	2%	1%	65%
<a> = TRAP	86%	2%	0%	12%
<ea>, <ee> = FLEECE	86%	2%	0%	12%
triphthongs	33%	3%	1%	63%

⁴ Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

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Pronunciation feature	right %	wrong %	right and wrong %	not applicable / not provided %
voiceless dental fricatives	87%	3%	3%	6%
<i>the</i> before V	33%	3%	0%	64%
<-s> forms as /s/	55%	3%	0%	42%
<i> = KIT	89%	3%	4%	3%
dark l	71%	4%	4%	21%
<or> = STRUT, NURSE	26%	4%	2%	67%
centring diphthongs	59%	5%	22%	14%
spread V	65%	5%	25%	4%
final voiced C	78%	5%	6%	11%
<-ing> forms as /ɪn/	18%	5%	0%	77%
<(w)or> = NURSE	28%	5%	0%	66%
schwa as <a>	68%	6%	18%	7%
central V	80%	6%	12%	2%
<i>the</i> before C	88%	6%	0%	5%
<i>to</i> before V	15%	6%	3%	76%
<oo> = GOOSE	42%	7%	0%	51%
<-ate> as /ət/ (n./adj.), /ert/ (v.)	7%	7%	0%	85%
low V	76%	9%	12%	3%
linking r	38%	9%	0%	53%
rhoticity / non-rhoticity	78%	11%	0%	12%
strong forms	66%	11%	2%	21%
intrusive r	3%	11%	0%	86%
<-ed> forms of reg v. as /d/	39%	11%	3%	47%
<-ed> forms of reg v. as /ɪd/	23%	11%	2%	64%
schwa as <o>	53%	16%	16%	16%
aspiration	41%	16%	19%	24%
<-s> forms as /ɪz/	14%	21%	5%	60%
schwa as <u>	31%	22%	8%	39%
/ŋ/ followed by /g/	7%	44%	0%	48%

The results in the bottom lines of Table 2 reveal that one feature, /ŋ/ followed by /g/, was more confusing than all the others for the respondents, as it received 44% wrong responses and only 7% right ones (e.g., *single*). The respondents mistook the consonant for the letter and listed examples of words, in which /ŋ/ was not followed by /g/, however, in which the letter <g> was included in the spelling (e.g., *thinking*).

In addition, larger numbers of wrong answers were also found with reference to such features as: schwa spelt <u> (22%), <-s> forms pronounced as /-ɪz/ (21%), aspiration (16%) and schwa spelt <o> (16%). When it comes to schwa spelt <u> (22%) (e.g., *support*, *success*, *suppose*), the most typical mistake which students made was to treat the sequence of letters <ou> as the letter <u> (e.g., the weak form of *could* /kəd/). Other less frequent incorrect examples included words with a letter <u> not pronounced as schwa, (e.g., *perfume* /'pɜːfjuːm/) or words in which schwa was found but it was represented by a letter different from <u> (e.g., with <o> in *tonight*). On the other hand, the most frequently given good examples comprised function words *just*, *but*, and *must*.

As regards the feature <-s> forms pronounced as /ɪz/, only a small minority of the respondents correctly chose words in which the suffix <-s/-es> was pronounced as /ɪz/ after sibilants (14%). The majority of those who indicated this feature (26%) gave three types of

examples: words which ended with /ɪz/ regardless of their morphological structure, words in which the suffix <-s/-es> was pronounced as /z/ after voiced sounds (e.g., *eyes*), or words in which there was no suffix and where /ɪz/ was a part of a stem (e.g., *his*).

Aspiration created problems for 16% of the informants. Its erroneous cases included: no context for aspiration (e.g., *bones*), /pl-, pr-/ and /st-, sp-/ clusters (e.g., *plans*, *start*), and medial unstressed in unaspirated position of /p/ and /t/ (e.g., *sometimes*).

The analysis of erroneous responses concerning the feature schwa spelt <o> (16%) shows that respondents misinterpret schwa when it is a part of a GOAT diphthong (e.g., *so**, *hypo**) or a triphthong (e.g., *riot**). Among the good examples are both content words (e.g., *forget*) and functional words (e.g., *of*).

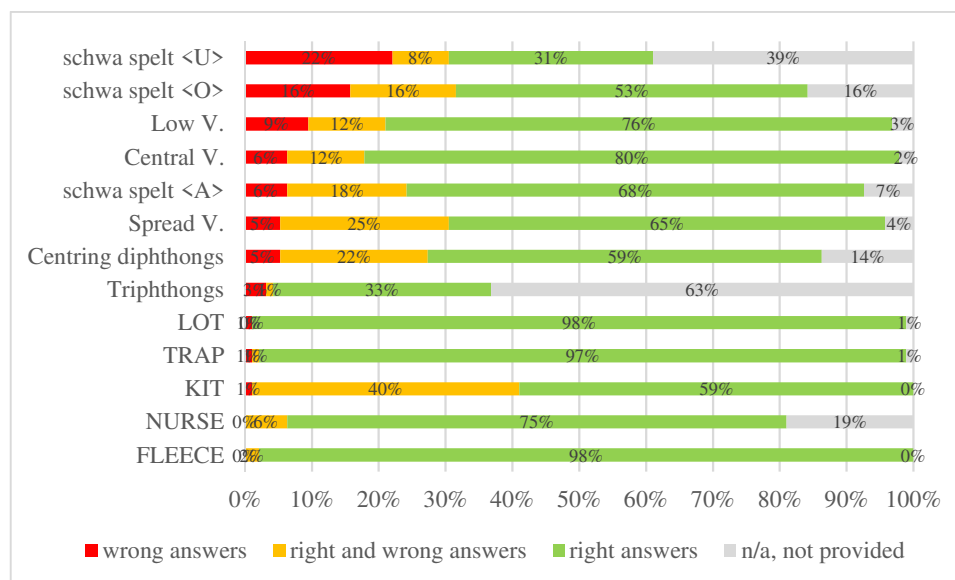
The next sub-sections (§3.2.1–3.2.5) present the results for each category of feature as listed in Table 1 (§2.4): vocalic features, consonantal features, connected speech features, inflected and derived forms, spelling-to-pronunciation patterns, and other features.

3.2.1 Responses for vocalic features

Figure 1 shows that for vowels, the percentage of ‘right’ answers outnumbers the combined ‘wrong’ and ‘right and wrong’ answers in all cases. Such features as FLEECE (98%), LOT (98%), TRAP (97%) and NURSE (75%), presented at the bottom of the graph, yielded a high percentage of correct examples (as shown by the green bar). Triphthongs (33%) were exemplified by one third of the group.

Figure 1

The Percentage of Four Types of Responses for Vocalic Features



Schwa spelt <u> and <o>, discussed above, comprises 30% and 32% of erroneous and partly erroneous answers, respectively. The reason for a high number of ‘right and wrong’ responses for the KIT vowel (40%) is the faulty inclusion of words with closing diphthongs, such as FACE (e.g., *hate*), PRICE (e.g., *die*) and less frequently CHOICE (e.g., *boy*) vowels, as well

as an occasional centring diphthong NEAR (e.g., *we're*) as an erroneous example of a word with a sole KIT vowel.

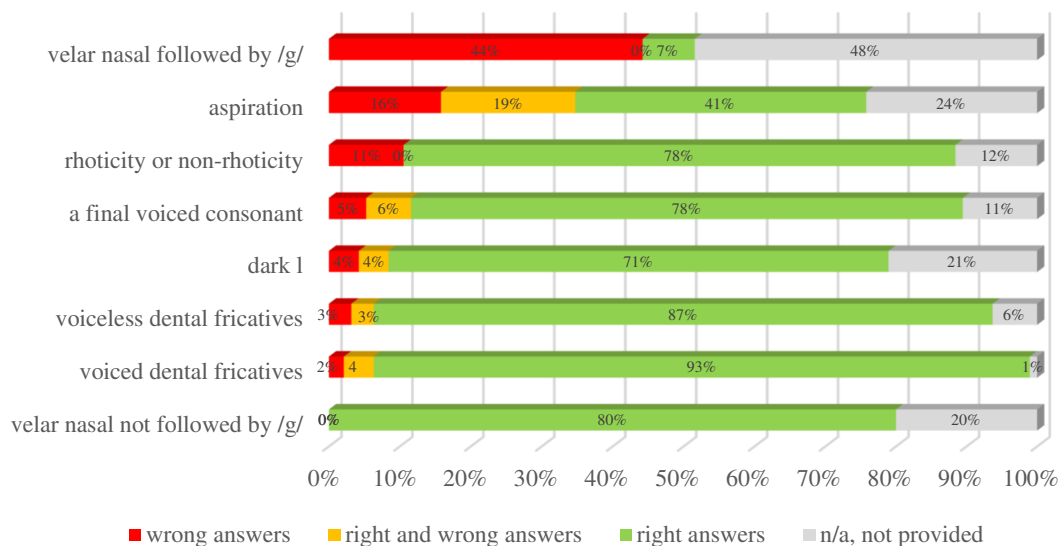
The graph also illustrates that centring diphthongs (27%) and the terms referring to the tongue position or lip shape for vowels — low (21%), central (18%) and spread (30%) — have not been understood by all the respondents. The centring diphthongs were replaced by closing diphthongs (e.g., *now*). The three vowel categories (low, central, spread) were exemplified with a random vowel; for example, low vowels were misrepresented by mid vowels such as DRESS in *never* or NURSE in *word* or diphthongs in *my*. The problem with schwa spelt <a> (24%), similarly to the above-mentioned schwa spelt <o> and <u>, was that the respondents did not pay attention to the letter <a>. Moreover, even if they did (e.g., *around*, *another*), they also provided other words in which schwa was represented by a letter different from <a>, or they did not recognise that schwa was a part of a diphthong NEAR (e.g., *real*) and not a sound on its own.

3.2.2 Responses for consonantal features

For consonants, summarised in Figure 2, the results show that around three-quarters of the group correctly exemplified all the features, except for: 1) /ŋ/ followed by /g/, which resulted in 44% wrong answers versus 7% correct ones; and 2) aspiration, with a similar ratio of right (41%) to wrong and partially wrong answers (35%). Among the consonantal features are: /ð/ (93%) and /θ/ (87%) correct examples, /ŋ/ not followed by /g/ (80%), (non-)rhoticity (78%), a final voiced consonant (78%) and dark [ɫ] (71%).

Figure 2

The Percentage of Four Types of Responses for Consonants



As regards the identification of whether the variety is rhotic or non-rhotic, 11% of the informants gave an erroneous answer to this question, mentioning rhotic as well as non-rhotic transcriptions (e.g., *burns* /bɜ:nz/ or /bɜ:rnz/), or words with the pre-vocalic /r/ (e.g., *cry*) which is common for both varieties. Interestingly, these results show that artists are using rhoticity

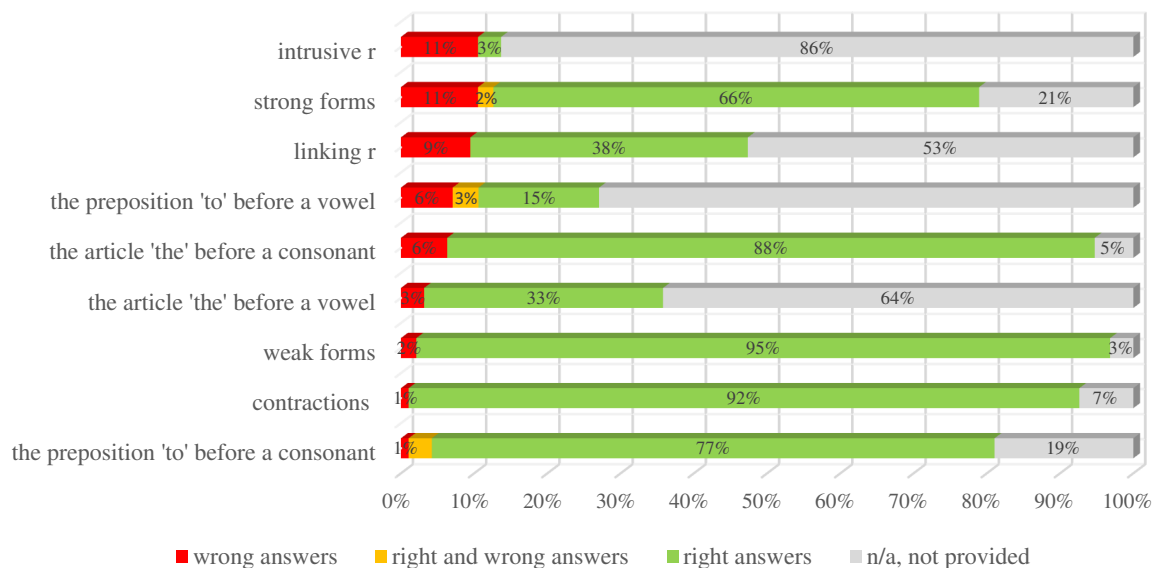
when singing, despite it not being a standard feature of their (expected) accent when speaking. Initially, when students categorised singers' accents, 55% were classified as non-rhotic while 45% as rhotic. However, 70% of the respondents listed examples of non-rhotic pronunciations and 30% of rhotic ones, which contradict the findings of Trudgill (1997), wherein British pop and rock singers reportedly tend to adopt an Americanised singing style. Thus, the results on rhoticity suggest that roughly 15% of the students might still not understand what constitutes an example of rhoticity.

3.2.3 Responses for connected speech features

The predominantly green bars of Figure 3 show reassuring results for connected speech elements; right answers outnumber wrong ones except for intrusive /r/, for which there were only 3% correct instances and 11% wrong ones. A high percentage of right answers for weak forms (95%), contractions (92%), the article *the* before a consonant (88%), the preposition *to* before a consonant (77%) and strong forms (66%) implies that the respondents understood their function in English.

Figure 3

The Percentage of Four Types of Responses for Connected Speech



One respondent whose lyrics did not include intrusive /r/, provided the following explanation "...you can actually hear the intrusive /r/ in some other Pink Floyd songs such as Astronomy Domine (e.g., *Oberon, Miranda_r and Titania*) or Corporal Clegg (e.g., *umbrella_r in the rain*)" (S.77). Wrong examples (11%) included: a) words with the right context for intrusive /r/, however, with no /r/ ($n = 1$) (e.g., *saw us /sɔ: ʌs/*); b) words with /r/ ($n = 4$) (e.g., *streets*); c) words with a silent letter <r> ($n = 2$) (e.g., *world /wɜ:ld/*); or d) an unrelated feature like linking ($n = 3$) (e.g., *away and*). As regards linking /r/, here 9% of the respondents gave wrong examples, which in fact exhibit rhoticity for American English ($n =$

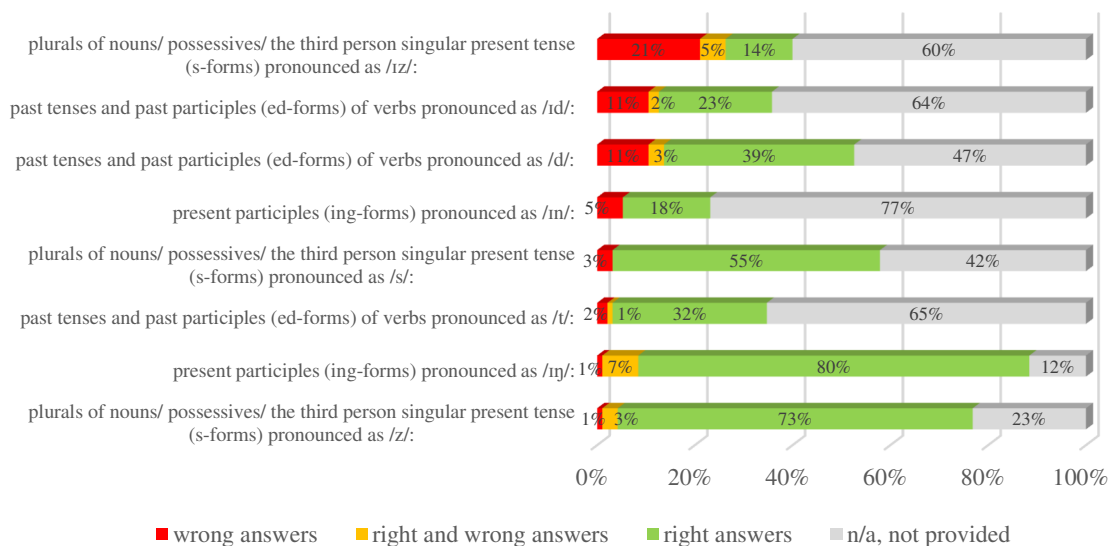
4) (e.g., *better* /'betər/), non-rhoticity ($n = 4$) (e.g., *before you* /bɪ'fɔː ju/), or a wrong context for linking /r/, which is, namely, after a high vowel ($n = 6$) (e.g., *you own, I am*).

3.2.4 Responses for inflected and derived forms

The results for inflected and derived forms are presented in Figure 4. The only feature which scores low is <-s> forms pronounced as /ɪz/, discussed above under Table 2 (§3.2). In all other features, correct examples outnumber the incorrect ones, e.g., <-s> forms pronounced as: /z/ (73%) and /s/ (55%); <-ed> forms of verbs rendered as: /d/ (39%), /t/ (32%) and /ɪd/ (23%); and <-ing> forms articulated as: /ɪŋ/ (80%) or /ɪn/ (18%).

Figure 4

The Percentage of Four Types of Responses for Inflected and Derived Forms



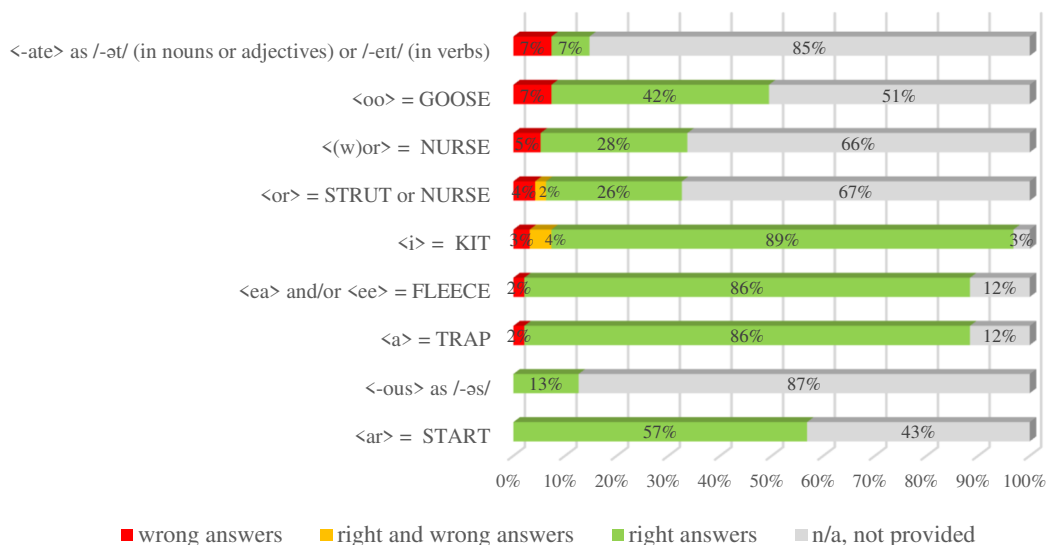
The pronunciation of <-s> forms as /z/ is a feature that is usually misarticulated by Polish respondents at the beginning of the course, owing to the lack of final voicing in the Polish language (Sobkowiak, 1996, p. 58). It is thus interesting to see the high percentage of right responses (73%). The incorrect responses for <-ed> forms pronounced as /d/ (11%) included irregular (e.g., *found*) and regular verb forms in which this suffix is pronounced as /ɪd/ after /t, d/ (e.g., *addicted*) or a modal verb (e.g., *could*). The wrong answers for <-ed> forms pronounced as /ɪd/ (11%) indicate that the informants only looked in their transcriptions for the /ɪd/ symbols without taking the morphological structure of the word into account. The erroneous examples included <-ed> forms articulated as /d/ (e.g., *cried*), a noun *side* and a contracted form *I'd*.

3.2.5 Responses for spelling-to-pronunciation patterns and other features

Letter-to-sound correspondences were less problematical for learners, with less than 7% of incorrect answers, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

The Percentage of Four Types of Responses for Letter-to-Sound Correspondence



Moreover, some spelling-to-pronunciation patterns displayed high levels of correctness, for example: the letter <i> as KIT (89%), <a> as TRAP (86%), the sequences <ea> or <ee> as FLEECE (86%), <ar> as START (57%). Others, although less frequently identified, were also mostly right, for instance <oo> as GOOSE (42%), <(w)or> as NURSE (28%), <or> as STRUT or NURSE (26%) and a suffix <-ous> as /-əs/ (13%). The suffix <-ate> as /-ət/ in nouns or adjectives or /-eɪt/ in verbs obtained the same number of right (7%) and wrong (7%) answers respectively.

The questionnaire also inquired about proper names, non-grammatical forms, non-standard pronunciation and accent-specific pronunciation features. Among 24% of reported proper names there were, for example: *California, Elton John, Kool-Aid, Rome, Peter Pan, Bon Jovi, Frankie, and Tommy*. The listing of non-grammatical forms and non-standard pronunciation was meant as a starting point for a discussion about dialects; however, the results revealed that the respondents did not understand what it involved. Apart from four good examples of non-grammatical forms (e.g., *He don't play for respect, I been, It don't matter, she live*), the respondents listed such features as: a) assimilated forms (e.g., *gonna, wanna, gotta*); b) the contraction *ain't*; c) interjections and exclamations (e.g., *ugh, oh, ooh, whoa, wooh*); d) the suffix <-ing> as <-in> (e.g., *keepin'*); and e) and short forms (e.g., *'cause, 'bout, 'til, and yes as ya, yeah*). Among the non-standard pronunciation variants, the following features of casual connected speech were provided: a) suffix <-ing> as <-in> -e.g., *knowin, gonna*); b) *t*-elision (e.g., *little bit*); c) a short form of *because* as *cos* and *about* as *'bout*; and d) *d*-elision (e.g., *ruled the*). When asked to list accent-specific pronunciation features, the informants limited their answers to either American or British English. The American features included: rhoticity

(e.g. *air*), LOT (e.g., *follow*), BATH (e.g., *can't*), *what's* as /wʌts/, the lack of a centring diphthong SQUARE in *compare* and NEAR in *year*, *worry* as /'wɜ:ri/ and *either* as /'i:ðər/. On the other hand, British features included: non-rhoticity (e.g., *California*), LOT (e.g., *everybody*), a diphthong NEAR (e.g., *dear*), BATH (e.g., *glances*), and a diphthong SQUARE (e.g., *nightmares*).

3.3 Attractiveness and usefulness of the task

After completing the task, 76 of 95 respondents evaluated its attractiveness and usefulness. As regards the first criterion the results on a 5-point scale are as follows: attractive (63%), neither attractive nor unattractive (28%), extremely attractive (8%), not very attractive (1%), not attractive at all (0%). The usefulness of the task scored higher marks: useful (68%), neither useful nor useless (21%), extremely useful (8%), not very useful (2%), not useful at all (0%).

The detailed responses on the usefulness of the task revealed a wide selection of reasons. Each student could provide more than a single reason. The respondents reported that they had learnt the pronunciation of words ($n = 17$), approached phonetics by doing something enjoyable ($n = 17$), and explored differences between BrE and AmE and singer-unique accents ($n = 12$). The exercise also helped them to notice the difference in an artist's pronunciation in songs and in speech ($n = 5$). They also worked on transcription ($n = 9$), became more aware of stress, rhythm, stressed and unstressed syllables, stress-shift ($n = 7$), weak forms ($n = 7$) and sounds ($n = 4$), including intrusive /r/ ($n = 3$) and linking /r/ ($n = 3$). They also felt that they had improved their own pronunciation skills ($n = 4$) and learnt that phonetics could be useful in life ($n = 3$). Other single comments remarked upon the opportunity to revise theory and terms, appreciate the complexity of English phonetics, encounter different types of morphemes, and focus on accent(s).

Nearly half of the respondents (49%) found the task more attractive than other phonetics activities, 9% expressed a contrary opinion and 39% were undecided. Seventy open-ended responses show that what they liked most about the activity was the fact that they could work with the text of their own choice (71%), which gave them more control over the assignment: "the free nature of the task, no obligation regarding the type and genre of the song" (S.51). Three respondents described it as an engaging and enjoyable task, which involved more creativity and imagination. Others appreciated the combination of work with pleasure ($n = 5$), found it a nice change from the usual exercises ($n = 6$) and a more approachable way to learn. They found it interesting to learn to transcribe in this way and to look at the lyrics more thoughtfully from a different perspective. They recounted that they liked the topic itself because of the variety of issues (e.g., linking /r/) ($n = 3$) and admitted that this activity broadened their knowledge. They had a chance to listen to different accents and to see how an accent may change ($n = 3$). They were also able to compare spoken English to singing. They reported that working on lyrics with music helped them to: focus and become involved in the task, pronounce lyrics/some words correctly, remember new material, understand phonetics issues in a better way and see how they could use phonetics skills in real life. They also stressed the social aspect of the activity, as they got to know the musical tastes of their groupmates, they themselves had an opportunity to express themselves with a song of their choice, and this even helped them bond with fellow students who shared their interests.

However, 24% reported disliking the fact that the activity was time-consuming, arduous, and repetitive, involving listening and analysing ($n = 12$). They also disliked its complexity because the scope of the analysis was too vast, with too many features to be examined ($n = 7$); the self-study nature of the task ($n = 2$); presenting this task in front of the class ($n = 2$). After university lessons shifted online during the pandemic, the respondents did not appreciate

presenting their work, because of the technical challenges involved in simultaneously playing the audio and showing their transcription.

4 Discussion

This activity with a focus on form provided the students with opportunities to gain and revise phonetic knowledge at their own pace. They exercised their analytical skills by working on the lyrics of their own choice which they enjoyed.

The results show that the majority of the students were able to provide good examples of: a) the vowels LOT, FLEECE, TRAP; b) the consonants /θ/, /ð/, /ŋ/ not followed by /g/; c) the connected speech features such as weak forms, contracted forms, the article *the* pronounced as /ðə/ before a consonant; d) the letter-to-sound correspondences <i> = KIT, <a> = TRAP, and <ee> = FLEECE.

The respondents found this activity (extremely) attractive (71%), (extremely) useful (76%) and more attractive than other phonetic tasks (49%). Nevertheless, nearly one quarter of the cohort indicated the major drawback of this time-consuming task was that its scope was too large. What they appreciated most was the opportunity to exercise their phonetics expertise in a real-life activity, their autonomy in the selection of the material and the fact that they were able to learn phonetics by being actively involved in transcription and analysis, owing to their personal relationship with the song. According to the respondents, the major benefits of this task involved: learning the pronunciation of words, revising the theory of phonetics and focusing on accent(s) or the artist's non-standard pronunciation in a song. One respondent cited the example of Sting's northern rendition of BATH in British English in his 1993 song, *The Shape of My Heart*, where "he pronounces *the sacred geometry of chance* with *chance* as /tʃæns/ although he is British" (S.6).

There are limitations to the study and some shortcomings of the procedure. The results could have been different if the 'not provided' category had been accounted for and if it had constituted a separate category, not combined with 'non-applicable'. The design could also be improved to meet the students' needs better, most notably by reducing the vast scope of the task and the time needed for its completion. Thus, restricting the number of features would be recommended.

5 Conclusion and implications

The foremost conclusion is that the following features present obvious challenges to Polish university English first-year students: /ŋ/ followed by /g/, aspiration, <-s> forms pronounced as /ɪz/, KIT vowel, spread vowels, centring diphthongs, and schwa spelt <o>, <u>, <a>. These features should therefore be practised several times during a course.

Through this activity, the respondents reviewed features of English phonetics and showed whether they had learnt and understood the terms and concepts, which was the main aim. They gained new skills such as typing transcription and phonetic symbols, making use of the online transcription application Photransedit, and performing in front of the class or online, which involved managing audio and transcription. They reflected on different pronunciation features by paying attention to details when they compared canonical dictionary transcriptions with the actual pronunciation of the artist.

The self-study character of the activity permitted them to revise the material at their own pace. Using online tools for phonetic feature identification required autonomy and was meant to raise students' awareness of phonetics. It is hoped that they became more confident in their own phonetic expertise. In addition, they were encouraged to do some extra reading on an

artist's origin, place of residence and accent to verify whether their assumptions were right, which served as a prelude to a discussion on accent variation.

To conclude, this is a task which has its place in a phonetics course. Students appreciated being able to choose their own song to analyse, and the combination of words with music seemed to constitute a pleasant, entertaining element in their learning. As each student worked on their own text, the responsibility for providing good answers was shifted onto them. They could experience how phonetics works in the language and how they can apply it to examine speech and draw conclusions about an accent.

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Appendix

A List of Most Frequently Chosen Songs

- Adele. (2008). Chasing Pavements [Song]. On *19*. XL Recordings; London.
- Adele. (2011). Set Fire to the Rain [Song]. On *21*. XL Recordings; London.
- Adele. (2011). Someone Like You [Song]. On *21*. XL Recordings; London.
- Adele. (2015). Hello [Song]. On *25*. XL Recordings; London.
- Adele. (2015). When We Were Young [Song]. On *25*. XL Recordings; London.
- Sheeran, E. (2013). I See Fire [Song]. On *Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. Water Tower Music & Decca; Burbank & London.
- Sheeran, E. (2014). Thinking out Loud [Song]. Asylum & Atlantic; New York.
- Sheeran, E. (2017). Castle on the Hill [Song]. On Asylum & Atlantic; New York.
- Sheeran, E. (2021). Bad Habits [Song]. Asylum & Atlantic; New York.

About the author

Marta Nowacka teaches English phonetics and pronunciation at the University of Rzeszów in Poland. Her research concentrates on the Polish-accented speech of university students of English and the methodology of teaching phonetics to adults in an EFL context. She has co-authored two course-books on English pronunciation: *How much wood would a woodchuck chuck?: English pronunciation practice book* (Mańkowska et al., 2009) and *Sally meets Harry: Primer to English pronunciation and spelling* (Nowacka et al., 2011).

Email: mnowacka@ur.edu.pl