FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of English and ELT Methodology

A Review of a Bachelor's Thesis
submitted to the Department of English and ELT Methodology,
Faculty of Arts, Charles University

Name and titles of the reviewer: Luca Cilibrasi, PhD
☐ supervisor X opponent
Author of the thesis: Snezhanna Markova
Title of the thesis: The contrastive analysis of vowels characteristics in Russian English
Year of submission: 2018

Level of expertise:
X excellent X very good ☐ average ☐ below average ☐ inadequate

Factual errors:
☐ almost none X appropriate to the scope of the thesis ☐ frequent less serious ☐ serious

Chosen methodology:
X original and appropriate ☐ appropriate ☐ barely adequate ☐ inadequate

Results:
X original ☐ original and derivative ☐ non-trivial compilation ☐ cited from sources ☐ copied

Scope of the thesis:
☐ too large X appropriate to the topic ☐ adequate ☐ inadequate

Bibliography (number and selection of titles):
☐ above average (scope or rigor) X average ☐ below average ☐ inadequate

Typographical and formal level:
X excellent ☐ very good ☐ average ☐ below average ☐ inadequate

Language:
X excellent ☐ very good ☐ average ☐ below average ☐ inadequate

Typos:
X almost none ☐ appropriate to the scope of the thesis ☐ numerous

Overall evaluation of the thesis:
X excellent X very good ☐ average ☐ below average ☐ inadequate

Brief description of the thesis (by the supervisor, ca. 100-200 words):

Review, comments and notes (ca. 100-200 words)
Strong points of the thesis:

This thesis focuses on the production of English vowels by native speakers of Russian. 10 participants were selected and recorded, and the formants of their vowels were analysed using Praat. The thesis deals with an interesting topic and it does so with great clarity and precision. The student shows excellent analytical skills and excellent technical skills in the use of Praat and in the plotting of the results. The thesis is written in good English and typos are limited to a few articles. I also find very interesting that the student distinguished between lexical and function words as part of the analysis.

Weak points of the thesis:

There are three main limitations: It is not clear how the choice of the participants was carried out, or, better, why some participants were excluded. The thesis lacks completely any statistical analysis. Despite the fact that the student included participants with varying levels of proficiency in English, there is no analysis of the effects of proficiency on the pronunciation of vowels.

Questions to answer during the Defence and suggested points of discussion:

General main question on the design/analysis: You have data on levels of proficiency, but you don't include these in the model. Are speakers with higher levels of English producing vowels that are closer to the English ones? Or is proficiency (as measured with language tests) irrelevant in regard to the pronunciation of the vowels? Why did you not discuss the relation between proficiency and pronunciation?

Page 31. The text says:
"The criteria for choosing the speakers included 18–30 age range, B2–C2 level of fluency, ability to read complicated texts in English and a noticeable Russian accent. A number of potential participants were discarded because of their low fluency level, which could pose a problem with pronunciation of certain complex words, and a non-Russian sounding or an imperceptible Russian accent."

One aspect of this section is particularly concerning. Did you exclude all the participants that you feel did not have enough of a strong Russian accent? If that is the case, your result is weakened (some would say: circular): Of course you find odd vowels if you select only participants that produce odd vowels *a priori.* The selection of participants need to be better justified.

Page 32. The text says:
"I would reiterate the information the participants had before coming in, making sure they understood the aim of my study "

This choice is a bit surprising. Usually the best results are obtained by deceiving the participants, not letting them know what they are tested about. Don't you think your choice might have influenced their pronunciation. If not, why?

Page 33. The text says:

"In order to measure the vowel formants, each speaker's recordings were put through a Praat script that determined the formant frequencies for all vowels, and different settings were used to account for the difference in gender"

I would like more detail about this, since also within the same gender there can be considerable differences in pitch.

Page 35. The text says:

"F1 measurements for close and close-mid front vowels [i:] and [ɪ] are almost identical, while the same values for [e] and [æ] are gradually increasing as the height of the vowel decreases. However, there is not a big difference between those either."

The use of terms such as "almost identical" or "there is not a big difference" is problematic. Statistical analysis is important because it gives an independent instrument to establish whether values are comparable or significantly different. I understand that statistics is not part of the training you received in this programme, so, my question is: are there any other reasons (apart from the lack of training) that made you decide not to perform any statistical analysis?

Similarly, at page 35, the text says: "the difference between the Russian /e/ and /æ/ is slightly greater than between /i/ and/ɪ/."

It would be very interesting to know whether there actually is a significant difference between the two pairs: are Russian speakers aware that /e/ and /æ/ are different, and unaware that /i/ and/ɪ/ are different? If this was the case, it would raise the important empirical question of why it is that way. Unfortunately, we cannot delve into this issue because there is no statistical analysis.

NOTE: see this reference on the Journal of Phonetics to understand what analysis I have in mind:
Bergmann, C., Nota, A., Sprenger, S. A., & Schmid, M. S. (2016). L2 immersion causes non-native-like L1 pronunciation in German attriters. *Journal of Phonetics*, *58*, 71-86.

Other comments:

This is a very good thesis that fills a gap in the literature and provides potentially interesting data. The student did a great job in finding such a major limitation in the scientific literature on the topic, and faced the issue with rigour and precision. There are some minor problems in the thesis, but these appear more than reasonable if we consider that this is a BA thesis and probably the first piece of academic work completed by the student. The aspects I find more concerning are the lack of discussion of proficiency effects, and the aforementioned risk of circularity of the conclusion, due to a debatable rationale for the choice of participants. I look forward to hearing the justification of the student for these choices. Despite these limitations, I believe this thesis is an excellent piece of work, and I recommend it to be accepted.

I hereby
X recommend   □ do not recommend   to accept the bachelor's thesis.

And I propose the following grade:
X excellent □ very good □ good □ fail

Place, date and signature of the reviewer:
Prague,

27-08-2018