Dr. Eva Maria Luef
E-mail: evamaria.luef@ff.cuni.cz

Charles University
Univerzita Karlova

Faculty of Arts
Department of English Language and ELT Methodology
nám. Jana Palacha 2
116 38 Prague 1
Czech Republic

August 21, 2020

MA Thesis Report:
Tina Skočilová
"The development of Czech pupils' L2 phonology assessed with a reading task"

The thesis discusses the results of a standardized English reading test (YARC) administered to Czech children of different ages (kindergarten, primary school). Phonological correctness scores were compared between the two age groups in order to draw inferences regarding the age of onset and phonological (reading) skills. Results varied by type of reading mistake (substitutions, omissions, etc.) and, to a limited degree, by age group. The thesis is generally well-organized and the methods are appropriate for the research questions.

The introduction is a bit lengthy and touches on a variety of subjects that are not of particular relevance to the study. For instance, the discussion of innate vs. emergent theories of language acquisition or the discussion of different teaching methods are not pertinent to the overall topic of the thesis. The part discussing age of onset, development of reading skills, and the differences between Czech and English phonology is detailed, complete and the student shows a good understanding of the topic.

The method section is detailed and provides a good description of the study. I appreciate the inclusion of the tables listing the most frequent mistakes - they provide interesting insights into the data.
Some parts of the methods could benefit from clarification. On page 32 it is stated

"The whole session was recorded. I then used those recordings to write down the wrong pronunciations using the IPA and to categorise them into six groups – mispronunciations, substitutions, refusals, additions, omissions, and reversals."

A better explanation of these types of mistakes should be given and examples of them should be included. Later, when studying the tables, readers can see examples of some of the mistake types but not of all. When introducing these mistake types, a brief explanation and one example each would be informative.

If section 4.3 were to be moved before the first results are discussed, it would make the results much clearer. While reading the results and studying the graphs (starting page 33, Analysis), I wasn't sure about what mispronunciations occurred. It is easier for readers to grasp and follow the results if the explanations of the types of mispronunciations appear first (along with the tables listing them).

Regarding the results, I was surprised about some of the substitutions. For instance, *hall-hell* makes sense from a phonological point of view. I was wondering about substitutions such as *went-hint* and *reply-repeat*. Since there is little phonological similarity, are these mistakes related to context?
Alternatively, could there be a frequency effect? „Reply", for instance, being much more frequent than „repeat", or possibly constituting an English loanword in Czech and so the children are familiar with it from Czech and English, hence the confusion and substitution?

Regarding the purely phonological mistakes, I was wondering if a phonological neighborhood effect has influenced the results. For instance, the English word „nest" has a Czech counterpart (*nést*), and it is conceivable that the Czech words has neighborhood characteristics (dense, sparse) that could influence the erroneous English pronunciation as „next". Some words are cognates or loanwords in Czech (*park, click/ klik*), and this should be taken into account when studying phonological mistakes.

The discussion and conclusion sections provide a good summary of the results and give a number of possible explanations for the observed phenomena. It was found that:

„children with an earlier age of onset produced a significantly smaller number of substitutions than children with a later age of onset"

Here, I would also suggest to consider an alternative explanation: younger children (earlier onset group) have smaller vocabularies in general in their first and second languages, a fact that reduces phonological interferences between the two languages and phonological neighborhood effects of word groups in general. Thus, the fewer substitutions could be a function of the smaller vocabularies.

Minor comments:

Generally, there are quite a few odd sentence structures in the text. Formatting errors are also abundant, and the references list contains a number of formatting errors and omissions. For instance, sometimes book title are in Italics but not always (e.g., Hamers), superfluous punctuation occurs (e.g., Maftoon), and the issue numbers of articles are missing at times (e.g. Moyer, but many others).

Questions for the defence:

1. What can you say about English loanwords in Czech or cross-linguistic neighbors and reading mistakes that you observed in your study?
2. Do you have any observations regarding phonetic differences between the two age groups of readers?

In summary, the thesis represents a well-organized study that utilized appropriate methodology and materials to achieve interesting results. The contributions are well founded on solid theoretical grounds. The main objectives of a B.A. work have been fulfilled. I suggest the thesis to be accepted with a grade of *výborně*.

Eva Maria Luef, PhD