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Students' perceptions on the use of selected mobile apps in the process of acquiring L2 pronunciation – a preliminary study

Abstract

The accessibility and multimodality of modern technologies make them particularly beneficial for pronunciation learning and teaching. Google Play Store offers more than 300 English pronunciation apps, many of which have received high ratings ranging from 4.5 to 4.9 out of 5 stars. Most of these apps are available for free. Due to their capacity for individualized, customized, self-paced "anytime – anywhere" learning and automated feedback on individual performance and progress, these apps are gaining increasing popularity among English learners worldwide. This paper reports on a small-scale study that examined five of the highest-rated free apps: Elsa Speak – Learning English Pronunciation by ELSA, English Pronunciation 2019 – Correct Pronunciation by Grounders, English Pronunciation by NVG Std, Pronounce It by Maclo Studios, and Quick Pronunciation Tool by Tiago English Tutor. Twenty first-year BA students of English Philology from the University of Łódź participated in the study by testing the five apps and answering questions related to their overall design, utility, potential for learning, teaching, and pronunciation assessment. The results of the study revealed the learners' practical uses of the apps and their views on the value of using these apps for practising, teaching, and assessing English pronunciation skills.

Keywords: pronunciation teaching; pronunciation learning; computer-assisted language learning

1. Introduction

Technology has played a significant role in various aspects of human life in recent years. People are able to communicate easily through the use of various technology devices, including computers and mobile phones. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become integral to language teaching and learning in recent decades. The widespread

use of mobile phones, smartphones, laptops, and tablets in daily life has made technology a necessity in education. Incorporating mobile phones can facilitate self-learning, referred to as m-learning (Wang, Wiesemes, Gibbons, 2012). M-learning refers to the ability to learn anytime and anywhere through mobile devices. In the current world, modern technologies to facilitate language learning are becoming more popular among learners who want to improve their language skills. The accessibility and multimodality of these technologies may be beneficial for pronunciation learning and teaching, particularly during the pandemic when many students have been forced to participate in online learning. In this study, the researcher has chosen five top-rated Android applications created for English pronunciation learning. These apps are free to download via the Google Play Store and can be reviewed for their utility and potential for learning, teaching, and testing pronunciation. Twenty BA students of English Philology (first year) from the University of Łódź agreed to test the apps and then complete a questionnaire to assess specific aspects of each app. I hope that the findings will provide valuable insights into how these apps can be used as teaching and learning tools to achieve pedagogical goals.

2. The issue of m-learning

Mobile learning, or m-learning, has recently gained significant attention as a potential replacement for e-learning (Georgiev, Smrikarov, Georgieva, 2004; Turner, 2012). M-learning refers to the use of mobile devices for the so-called *anytime and anywhere* approach to studying, whether self-directed or assisted by the teacher. It has led to the development of a new approach called Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), also known as the "anywhere" approach, which enables students to learn in class and at home through the use of mobile tools such as smartphones and tablets (Trifonova, Ronchetti, 2006). While there is a clear interest in integrating m-learning into education, particularly in language teaching and learning, there are still challenges in selecting the most appropriate approaches (Traxler, 2007). Studies have shown that m-learning can effectively improve vocabulary, grammar, reading, and pronunciation skills (Chen, 2008). In particular, mobile devices can assist students in learning phonetic transcription and improving their oral production through listening and recording activities (Lai, Gu, 2011), as well as developing their listening skills through listening exercises (Chen, 2008).

Although m-learning may highly motivate students as a form of student-centred learning, there is a need for more guidance on effectively integrating it into teaching and learning English pronunciation (Haggag, 2018). Research has demonstrated the positive effects of m-learning on teaching and learning English phonetics (Haggag, 2018). Regarding the attitudes of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, some studies have found that students have positive attitudes towards using mobile devices in language learning (Ducate, Lomicka, 2013). A more recent study on using apps in pronunciation teaching and learning conducted by Walesiak (2021), revealed that students are satisfied with such method of learning segmental and some suprasegmental features and would like them incorporated into pronunciation courses.

3. Top-rated free mobile pronunciation apps available on Google Play Store

This section's primary purpose is to provide a more detailed description of each selected application, including information about their general designs, features, functions and instructions on how to use them.

3.1. ELSA Speak: Learn English Speaking
(formerly: ELSA Speak: Online English Learning and Practice or ELSA Speak: Learning English Pronunciation)

One of the apps evaluated in the study was ELSA Speak: Learn English Speaking. ELSA stands for English Language Speech Assistant. This application has been downloaded and rated by nearly 660,000 users worldwide, with a rating of 4.6 out of 5. The app was first launched in 2015 and since then, it has been constantly updated (last update: 18 December, 2022). It offers a range of lessons and exercises to help users improve their pronunciation, including listening tasks, phonetic transcription activities, and opportunities for recording and receiving feedback on pronunciation. The app also provides a personalized learning plan based on the user's progress. It is easy to download and use, with the option to log in through a Gmail account or Facebook. There are two versions of ELSA Speak: a free version with a limited number of lessons and an upgraded version with over 3,000 lessons organized into 22 key skills for mastering English pronunciation.

According to the company's description on Google Play Store, ELSA is an online English learning platform that utilizes artificial intelligence and exclusive voice recognition technology to correct pronunciation errors on a syllable-by-syllable basis. It has been voted as one of the top five such platforms in the world. With a community of over 10 million students, professionals, and travellers, ELSA offers a reliable and effective way to learn English with an American accent while minimizing errors.

ELSA is a relatively simple application to download. In order to use it, users must have a Gmail account or log in via Facebook. There are two versions of the app: a free version that offers a limited number of lessons (no more than 16) and an upgraded version that includes over 3,000 lessons organized into the 22 key skills necessary for mastering English pronunciation. The app begins by offering a personalized learning plan based on the user's progress. Upon clicking the START button on the welcome screen (Figure 1), users will be directed to specific lessons included in the course (Figure 2).
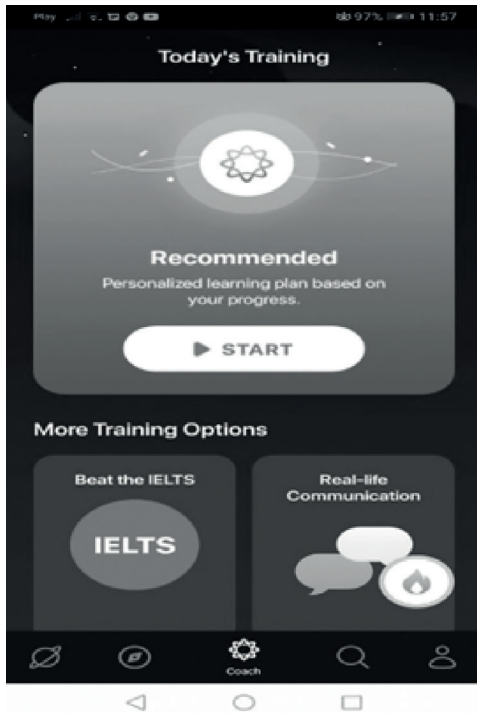
Figure 1. Elsa Speak welcome Screen
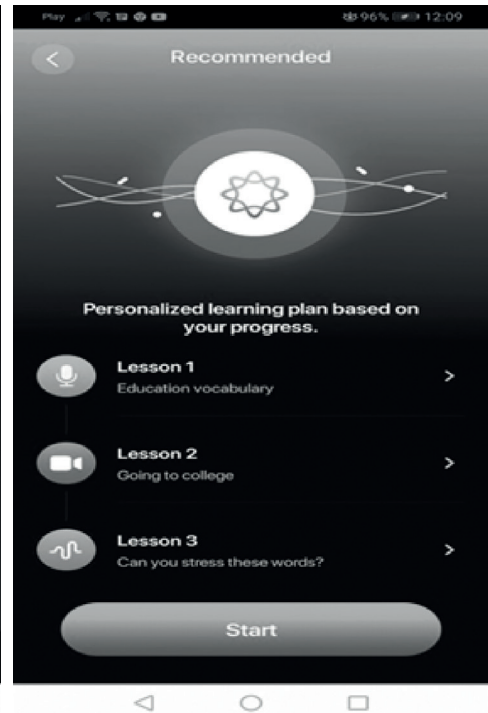Source: a screenshot from the app.

Figure 2. The choice of lessons and activities
Source: a screenshot from the app.

It is worth mentioning that each lesson includes various activities, such as listening to individual words, tracing their phonetic transcription, and recording one's own pronunciation for assessment by the ELSA assistant (Figure 3). Other lessons involve listening tasks, in which users must listen to and repeat longer sections of text. There are also exercises on sentence stress and intonation, during which users must listen to a native speaker and repeat the stressed elements of a sentence. The app allows users to record every activity and listen to their own speech, and the ELSA assistant provides instant feedback. If a user's pronunciation is correct, the feedback will be green; if it is generally correct but with some elements to work on, the feedback will be orange; if the system cannot recognize the user as a nearly-native speaker, the feedback will be red.

In addition to regular lessons, ELSA also offers various training options to help users improve their English skills. These include the "Beat the IELTS" section, which is designed to prepare learners for IELTS Speaking exams, the "Real-Life Communication" section, which teaches users how to speak confidently in a variety of everyday situations, the "Quick Learning" section, which includes short lessons to fit into busy schedules, the "Master Intonation" section, which covers different intonation patterns, and the "Review" section, which allows users to create their own collections of study sets divided into "difficult words" and "mastered words," based on recordings of their own speech (Figure 4).
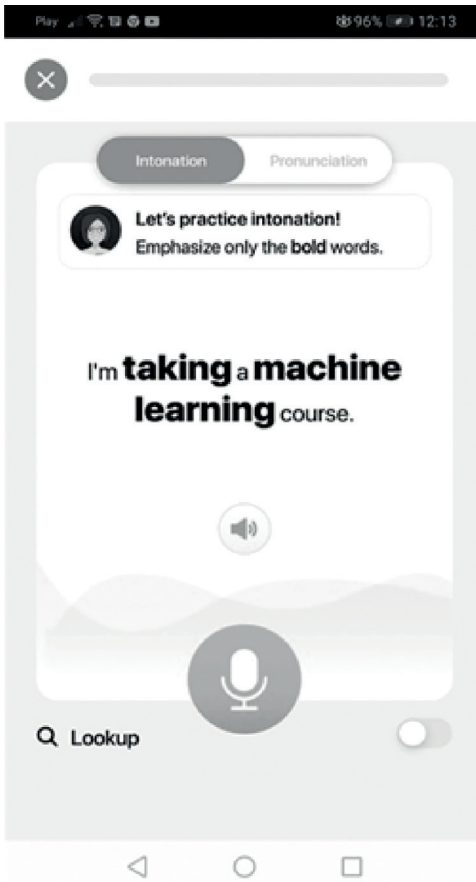
Figure 3. Sentence stress/intonation (Lesson 3)

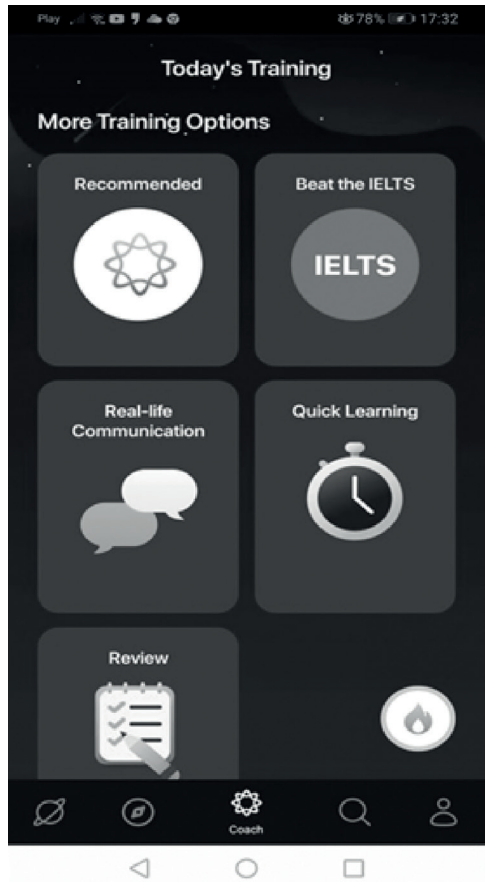Source: a screenshot from the app.

Figure 4. More training options

Source: a screenshot from the app.

One of the limitations of the app is that the number of lessons is limited to 32 in the free version. To access all of the lessons, users must either install a 7-day trial version or purchase the full version (which is available with either quarterly or annual payment options).

Another issue that some users have raised is that, at the time of this experiment, the app was programmed for General American speech and did not recognize other varieties, such as British English. This could have caused frustration for users who spoke a variety other than General American.

Overall, ELSA appears to be a useful tool for beginner second language learners, as it provides a wealth of information on proper word production. However, it is unlikely to be of much benefit to more advanced English learners, except possibly in the area of prosody, such as intonation and word stress activities.

3.2. English Pronunciation 2019 – Correct Pronunciation

Although it is not available on Google Play Store any longer, this app was tested in 2021 and advertised as one that takes up minimal memory on the user's device and is extremely easy to use and user-friendly. At the time of the study, it had been downloaded by nearly 3,000 users worldwide, who gave it an average rating of 4.8 out of 5 stars. In the comments section, users praised it as a simple and user-friendly tool that helps with everyday communication. The company advertised the app as follows: "If you have a problem with word pronunciation, mispronounced words, or do not pronounce names correctly, then we have the best app for you like English pronunciation: correct pronunciation is a mind-blowing application for pronouncing names and word pronunciation correctly. English pronunciation app develops your vocabulary and improves your speaking well. English Pronunciation is developed for students and teachers." The publisher also claimed that the app used both British and American accents and allowed users to pronounce words correctly by allowing them to record and assess their own speech. According to the company, the app had been updated to use minimal device space, work offline for mispronounced words, and include the latest features such as "text to voice" and "translate photo to text."

To start using the app, users simply needed to download it onto their smartphone. It did not require any login and was free of charge, though it included numerous advertisements. The welcome screen was straightforward, featuring four icons at the top and a writing space below them. Users could type a word, sentence, or longer text, click the loudspeaker icon, and have the text read aloud. However, the app did not provide phonetic transcriptions alongside the sentences, and the "translate photo to text" feature did not always work as intended. Despite these limitations, the app was free and therefore attractive to many users. There were two versions of the app's interface: a regular one (Figure 5) and a simplified one (Figure 6).
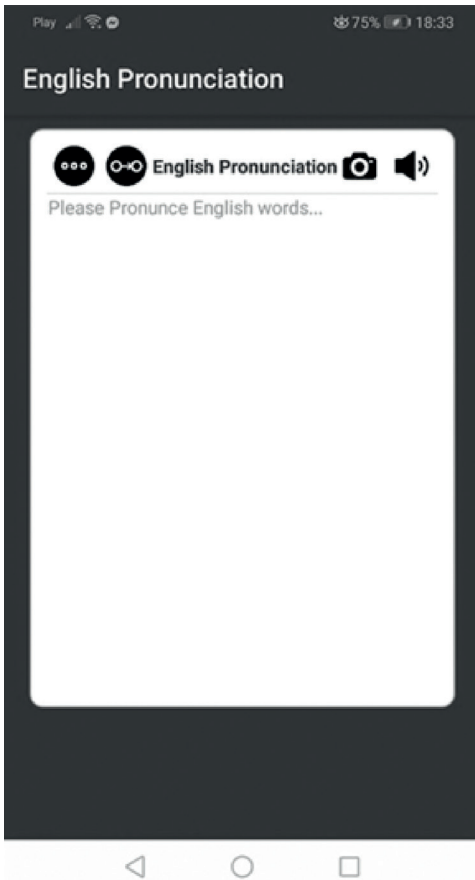
Figure 5. A 'regular' interface of the app

Source: a screenshot from the app.
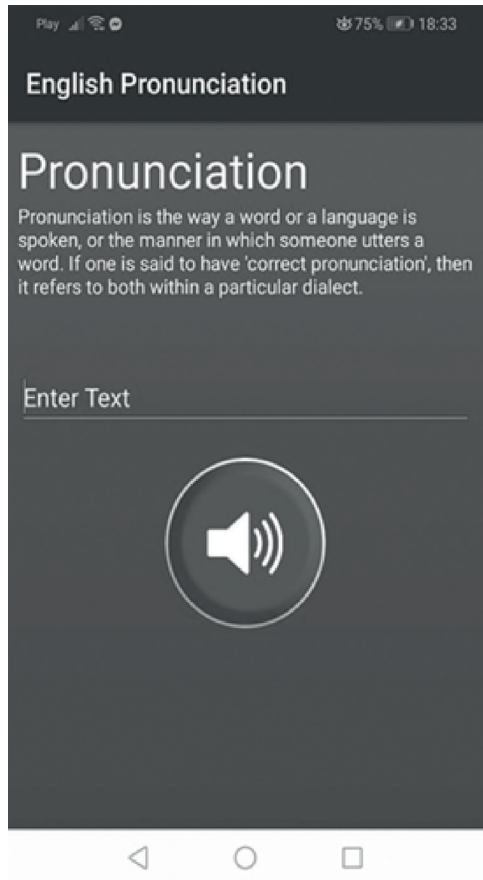
Figure 6. A 'simplified' interface of the app

Source: a screenshot from the app.

3.3. English Pronunciation (Learn Pronunciation v1.6.4)

This particular application was one of the most popular apps on the Google Play Store when searching for pronunciation apps. More than 5,000 people downloaded and rated it 4.6 out of 5 stars. The app was free of charge and had received a lot of positive feedback.

On opening the app, users could see a list of English sounds in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), including monophthongs and diphthongs. There were three icons next to each sound (Figure 7): a loudspeaker symbol to hear the sound, an orange icon with a list of words that contained the phoneme, and a YouTube "play" icon that displayed a video on the articulation of the sound (this feature was only available in the paid version of the app).

Figure 7. An IPA list of sounds in the app

Source: a screenshot from the app.

Figure 8. List of words containing a particular phoneme (in alphabetical order)

Source: a screenshot from the app.

In addition to the IPA recordings, the app had more to offer. By tapping the screen in the upper left corner, users could access various sections of the app, including "Learn," which provided additional information about specific words, "Practice," which allowed users to write words from transcription to spelling, and "Dictionary," which contained approximately 5,000 words included in the app.

3.4. Pronounce It (also known as: English Pronunciation Practice)

This is a relatively new app on the Google Play Store with much positive feedback and an average rating of 4.6 out of 5 stars from nearly 10,000 users. The app is designed to operate in both British and American English, which is a significant advantage (Figure 9). In addition, it offers an inbuilt dictionary, the ability to adjust the pitch and speed

of recorded words, the option to record students' speech, and the ability to create a list of words for pronunciation practice and self-recording options (Figure 10).
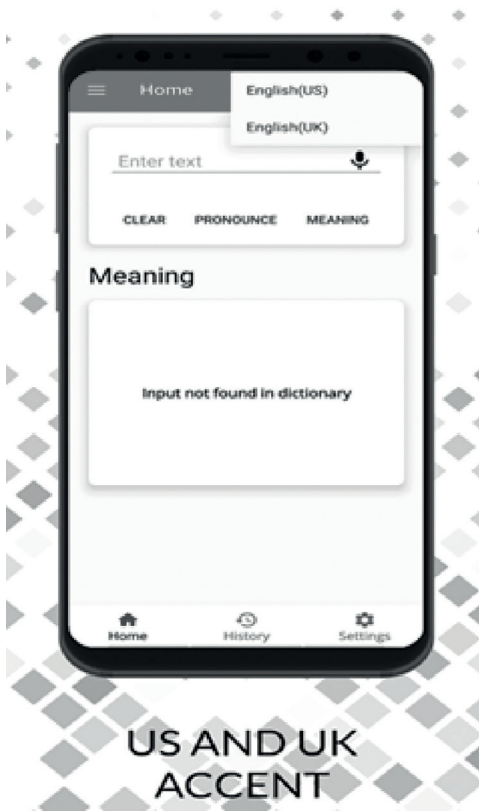

Figure 9. Language mode for the app

Source: a screenshot from the app.
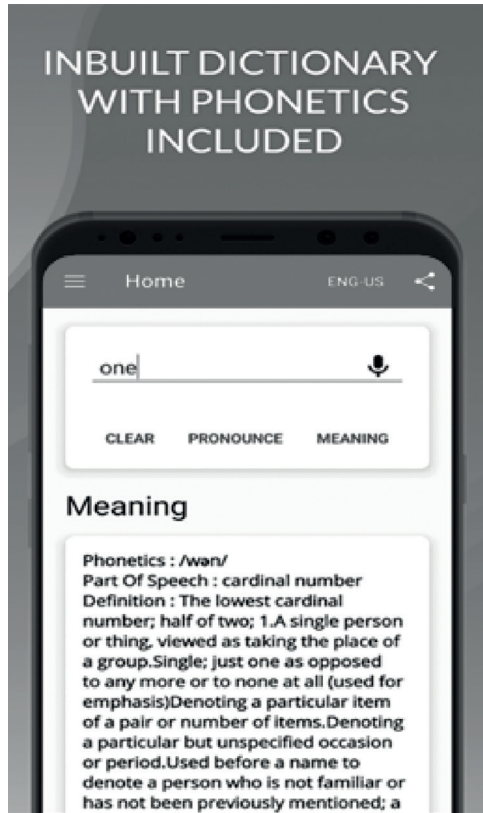
Figure 10. An inbuilt dictionary

Source: a screenshot from the app.

The creators of Pronounce It advertise it as a tool that can improve English pronunciation, even offline, by providing the opportunity to practice pronunciation through listening and repeating words. They emphasize the importance of learning correct pronunciation and encourage daily practice using the app. The app is a quick and convenient way to check the pronunciation of any English word, with the option to choose between American and British accents. The app is intended for all individuals, including students, teachers, and workers, who may need to check pronunciation on the go. It is also suggested that using the app can help prepare for exams such as TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC and improve confidence in speaking with friends, bosses, colleagues, and tourists. The company claims that learning to pronounce words correctly in English using different accents should not be difficult with Pronounce It, as it is designed explicitly for pronunciation needs. According to the description on Google Play, the app can be used as a pronunciation aid anywhere, and there is no longer a need to struggle with pronunciation when using it.

3.5. Quick Pronunciation (formerly Quick Pronunciation Tool)

This app was created and then published by Tiago Colombo, a tutor of English. Over 2,000 users have downloaded the app so far and of 4.6 out of 5. In addition to English, the app is available in 10 other languages, including popular ones such as Spanish, Italian, German French. One advantage of the app is that it is free of charge and does not contain any advertisements. Another important aspect is that its size is relatively small and hence battery usage is minimal. The app can also work offline, as it uses native text-to-speech functionality.

The app includes a useful feature that allows users to practice minimal pairs, which can be especially useful in phonetics classes (Figure 11). Although some features are only available in the paid version, there are still many available for free. Additionally, the app allows users to click on an arrow icon to access Wikipedia and Google Images pages for further information on any word they type in (Figure 12). The app is user-friendly and easy to use, with a convenient interface. The author encourages users to use the app to improve their confidence in speaking and impress others with their pronunciation, especially with foreign words which can be difficult to pronounce.

Figure 11. Minimal pairs activity

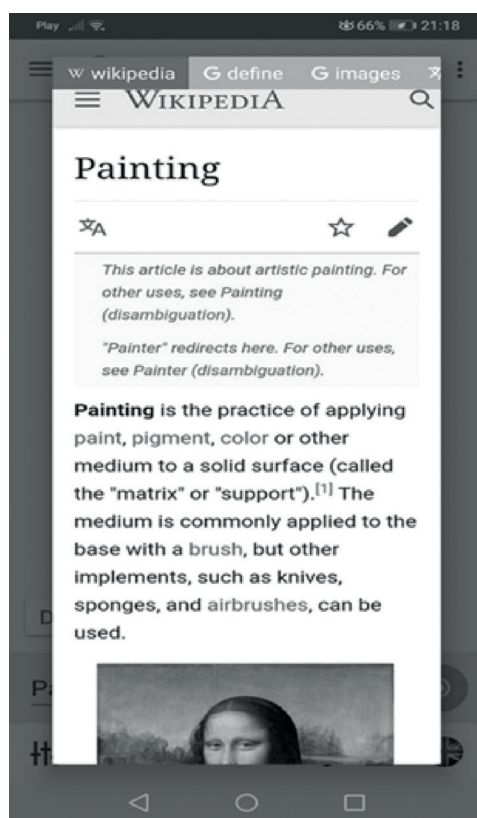Source: a screenshot from the app.

Figure 12. Redirecting option

Source: a screenshot from the app.

The app is advertised as being easy to use, with a user-friendly interface and quick access to previous words or a full list. The author suggests that it is a useful tool for both language teachers and students who need to check pronunciation on the go. The app is advertised as being able to pronounce even complex medical terms, biblical words, botanical names, and large numbers.

4. The study

In order to investigate the learning potential of mobile apps for pronunciation training and for autonomous learning, a preliminary study on the students' assessment of selected mobile pronunciation apps was conducted. The main aim of the study was to investigate students' perception of each app and to assess them according to the following set of criteria: the frequency of its use, the overall design, the level of difficulty in using it, the overall utility and the potential for future use/recommendation. The study addressed the following research questions: how important it is to incorporate mobile pronunciation applications in their learning and to what extent do students engage with the tested apps?

4.1. Participants

Between October and November 2021, twenty first-year Polish students of English philology at the University of Łódź participated in the study on a voluntary basis. The mean age of the participants was 19 years old, with the majority being female (12 participants). All of the students had a similar level of English language learning experience, ranging from 12 to 16 years. It should be noted that none of the participants had previously taken any phonetics courses. In fact, all of the participants were at the beginning of their two-semester pronunciation course, which focused on English sound segments with Standard British English as the default accent variety.

4.2. Method

For the purpose of the study, I decided to choose top 5 free Android applications for learning English pronunciation offered to download by Google Play Store. All of the apps were given the best rates: between 4,5–5 out of 5 stars. Besides, they got mostly positive feedback from the users (the comments were posted on Google Play Store below the app descriptions). Those apps are the following ones: Elsa Speak – Learning English Pronunciation by ELSA, English Pronunciation 2019 – Correct Pronunciation by Grounders, English Pronunciation by NVG Std, Pronounce It by Maclo Studios, and Quick Pronunciation Tool by Tiago English Tutor.

The students were asked to download all those apps on their smartphones. They were asked to test each app for 8 weeks – the frequency of the use of a given app depended on the participants (between everyday use and using it two or three times a week). Before downloading the apps, the students were shown how each app worked and they were familiarized with their functions by the teacher. The testing started in January 2022 and finished approximately in March 2022. After that period, the students were given a short

questionnaire to complete (5 questions plus optional comments on each aspect of testing a given app).

4.3. Material

The questionnaire mentioned in section 4.2 was composed of five questions related to the following aspects: 1) the frequency of the use of each app, 2) its interface/design, 3) possible difficulties in operating the app, 4) the utility of the app and 5) recommendation for the future use (see Appendix 1). These were multiple choice questions where participants were supposed to choose just one answer out of three or four. However, they could also leave their feedback (in form of a comment) on each issue covered in a given question.

4.4. Findings

The section reports on the results of questionnaires completed by those students who had been testing the pronunciation apps for approximately 8 weeks. The participants were asked to complete a post-study questionnaire covering questions about five areas of the use of the apps mentioned in section 4.2. Each area will be discussed in separate sections.

4.4.1. The frequency of use

This question was labelled as Q1 on the questionnaire sheet. The students were asked to assess the frequency of their use of particular apps. As it can be seen in Figure 13, Elsa Speak turned out to be the most-frequently used app with 15 students declaring to have been using it everyday (75%). Pronounce It was used by 11 students on the daily basis (55%), Quick Pronunciation Tool was also in the top three with 9 students using it everyday (45%). English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation turned out to be engaging for 8 participants (40%) and English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation was used on the daily basis by only one person (5%). Interestingly, the same app turned out to be used mostly once a week (75%). It seems that it failed to involve the participants to such an extent as other apps, especially Elsa Speak.
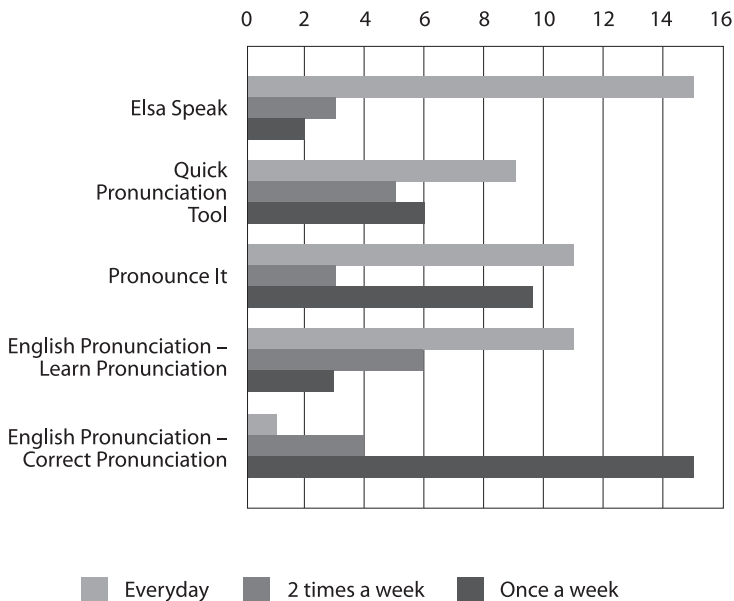
Figure 13. The results for Q1: How often did you use the apps? ($N = 20$)

Source: author's own analysis.

4.4.2. The overall design and interface

In respect of the overall design and interface, students turned out to be rather generous in their assessment. They were asked to choose the app with the most user-friendly interface and the most attractive design. The app that gained the best marks was Elsa Speak – students appreciated its interface and the fact that it is relatively easy to use (19 out of 20 students which makes up for 95%), 1 person (5%) decided that it was „just OK". Elsa Speak got mostly positive feedback from the participants. They were impressed by its attractive and user-friendly design. Another app that was highly rated was English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation with 13 answers claiming that they liked the app's design "very much". Only 2 participants expressed the opposite opinion. When it comes to the rest of the apps, students in the feedback section were rather neutral claiming that these were "not so bad, but not very exciting either". It seems that an easy interface is not always the most important aspect. Some students complained that the colours in some apps are annoying – especially the dark green one in English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation and the red one in English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation. Pronounce It was generally praised by students, most of whom gave it positive feedback in respect of user-friendly interface, ease of finding information, colours and graphics. 12 out of 20 students (60%) pointed out that they liked the app's design "very much". Quick Pronunciation Tool and English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation turned out to be less 'attractive' for students, as you can see in Figure 14.
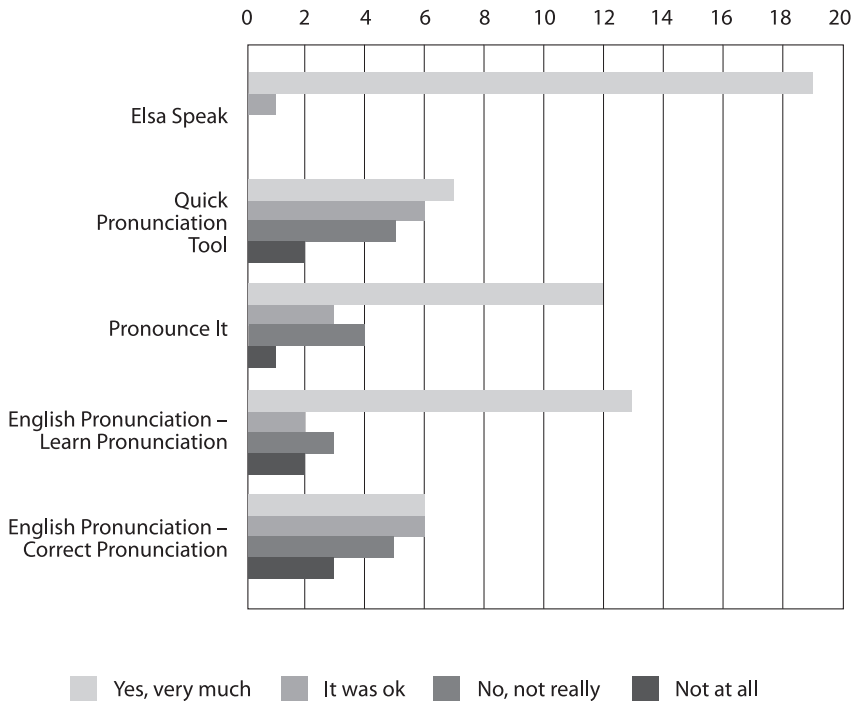
Figure 14. The results for Q2: Did you like the app's overall design? ($N = 20$)

Source: author's own analysis.

4.4.3. The level of difficulty in using the apps

The main aim of the third question (Q3) was to investigate the level of difficulty that the participants might have encountered while testing particular apps. As it can be seen (Figure 15), English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation was chosen the app which did not cause any particular problems with its use. 15 participants (75%) assessed it as "very easy" and left some positive feedback in the comment section. It seems that students did not have any difficulties with the use of English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation app. 17 students (85%) assessed the app as "rather easy" or "very easy". The situation changes when we look at other apps – Pronounce It, Quick Pronunciation Tool and Elsa Speak turned out to be more complex and elaborated. 8 students (80%) claimed that Pronounce It was either "rather difficult" ($N = 6$) or "very difficult ($N = 2$). Quick Pronunciation Tool also left 8 participants confused (5 assessed it as "rather difficult" and 3 – "very difficult"). Elsa Speak turned out to be "rather difficult" for 10 participants (50%) and "very difficult" for one person (5%).
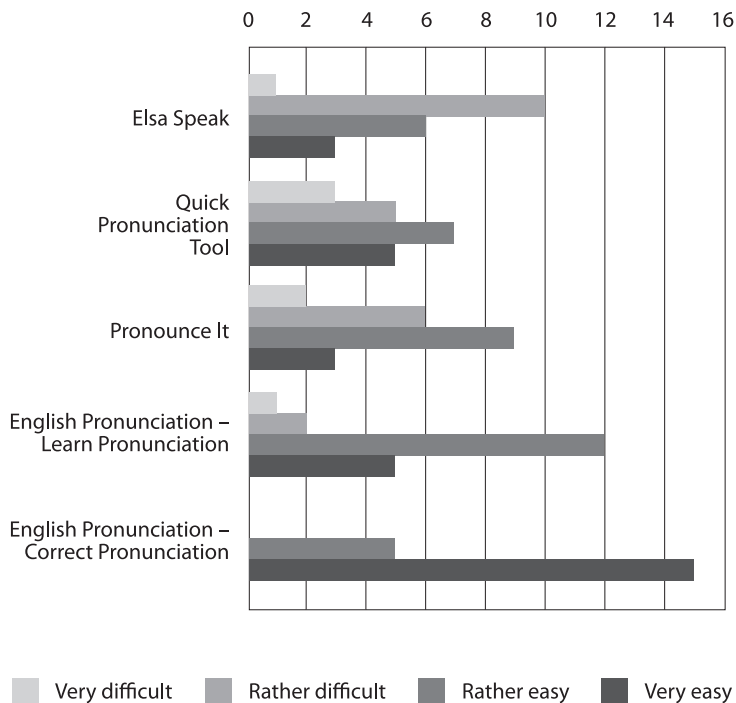
Figure 15. The results for Q3: Was the app difficult to use? (*N* = 20)

Source: author's own analysis.

4.4.4. The utility of the apps

In question (Q4) students were asked to assess particular apps in terms of their utility in the process of L2 pronunciation training. As seen in Figure 16, Elsa Speak gathered the most positive feedback with the majority of participants (*N* = 18, 90%) who claimed the app was "definitely" useful or "rather" useful for them as advanced learners of English. Only 2 participants (10%) presented the opposite point of view. Quick Pronunciation Tool turned out to be as successful as Elsa Speak with 17 participants (85%) assessing the app's utility as "definitely useful" (60%) and "rather useful" (25%). 3 participants (15%) obviously remained unconvinced. When it comes to Pronounce It, 16 participants (80%) expressed positive opinions about the usefulness of the app. 4 speakers (20%) were rather negative about its educational potential. English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation gathered 16 satisfied learners (80%). Here, similarly to Pronounce It, only 4 participants turned out to have the opposite point of view. Surprisingly, the results revealed that the app with the lowest potential for acquiring pronunciation turned out to be English Pro-nunciation – Correct Pronunciation. The opinions on its utility varied a lot – 4 students (20%) described the app as "definitely useful" and 3 of them (15%) claimed it was "rather useful". However, 8 respondents (40%) decided that the app was rather a waste of time and 5 others (25%) were even stricter in their opinion. Such results are in opposition to the previous assessment of some features of this particular app, such as overall design

and relatively low difficulty level of use. It seems that a user-friendly interface does not always go with the overall potential of a given app.
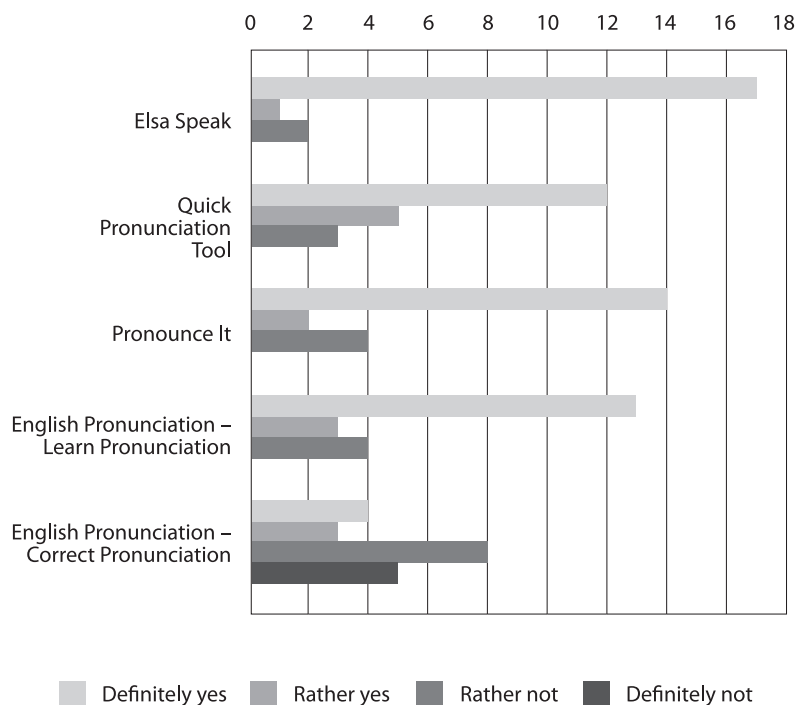
Figure 16. The results for Q4: Do you think the app was useful for you as a student of English? (*N* = 20)

Source: author's own analysis.

4.4.5. The potential for future use/recommendation

In the last question (Q5), the students were asked to assess the overall potential for learning English pronunciation by means of the five apps discussed above. In their responses, students took such features as IPA availability, phonetic transcription and the possibility of listening and recording their own responses. All 20 students (100%) decided that Elsa Speak was the app which combined all those options and it deserved recommendation. It is worth mentioning that in the comments some students admitted that the app was "sometimes too easy" for them and they "didn't find it challenging as advanced learners of English" (see: section 4.5). Besides, in their comments students pointed at two main disadvantages of this app, namely poor content in free of charge version and General American variety as the only one that the app operated on at that time. Even when the students produced separate words or whole sentences using British English variant, the Assistant didn't recognize it as correct pronunciation which made the students confused and frustrated. Pronounce It generally turned out to be slightly less successful than Elsa Speak – 14 students (70%) regarded it as particularly useful tool for learning English Pronunciation, while 6 participants (30%) did not see the app as potentially worth rec-

ommending. The comments written below Q5 revealed that according to the students, it was too easy for them and not that challenging as they thought it would have been at the beginning. Quick Pronunciation Tool turned out to be a bit more successful – 14 students (70%) decided that it was useful, while 6 others (30%) claimed otherwise. English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation, English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation divided advanced learners of English into two opposite groups – 11 students (55%) could not see the apps' potential for the effective pronunciation learning, while 9 students (45%) remained rather positive about the app. In their comments, the majority of students pointed out that this app is the most basic, the most boring and the least challenging of all. It seems that they had a completely different opinion than users who left lots of positive feedback on Google Play Store for the aforementioned application.
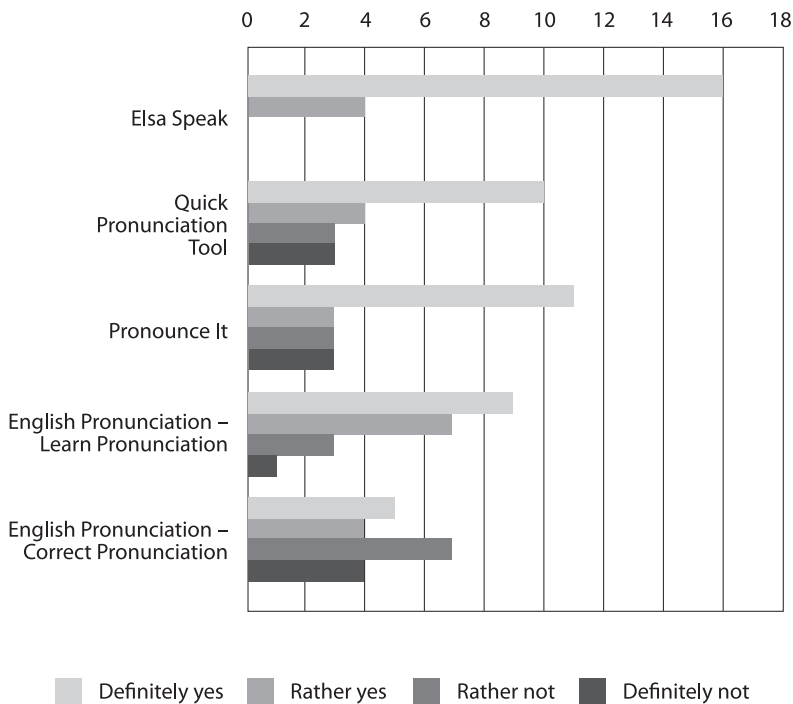
Figure 17. The results for Q5: Would you recommend this app to other learners of English?
($N = 20$)
Source: author's own analysis.

4.5. Students' feedback on the apps tested

This section provides an overview of students' comments that they were able to leave anonymously in the questionnaire below each question. Most of the participants provided interesting feedback and their comments were particularly helpful in order to formulate pedagogical implications. The comments are presented collectively for each application in separate sub-sections.

4.5.1. Elsa Speak

Feedback left by students about this particular app may suggest that they were generally satisfied with it. The main disadvantage turned out to be the lack of recognition of British English pronunciation and occasional problems with recognizing stress or intonation pattern by Elsa Speak Assistant. Some participants were disappointed that the premium version cost a lot and the free version does not offer many lessons. The comments regarding Elsa Speak are the following:

1. A good app, but I was disappointed with the fact that it doesn't really recognize British English pronunciation and the Elsa Speak Assistant kept on correcting me all the time – frustrating!
2. A free version is rather poor – only 32 lessons (in paid version – about 1,600).
3. A nice layout, but sometimes I got irritated with the reminders set automatically.
4. Generally OK, but sometimes it had problems with recognizing stress patterns.
5. A very helpful app, but to appreciate it more I would need to switch to the full version.
6. The best app of all tested – but rather expensive for an average student.
7. Great, I really loved the app – I could even pay for that.

4.5.2. English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation

This app got mostly negative feedback. The main problems students had with it were as follows: rather basic and unattractive layout, lack of phonemic transcription, no possibility of speech recording and the fact that the app turned out to be rather useless for advanced learners of English. Here are the comments left in connection with this app:

1. I love simple apps, but this is just… primitive.
2. A boring layout and limited number of functions – why such high mark on Google Play Store?
3. Nothing special, no phonemic transcription of words which is a huge letdown.
4. For people who want to check out the pronunciation of a given word – OK. But not for students who want to learn English phonetics – no transcription etc.
5. Quick and efficient for those who learn English, but in my opinion –rather useless for students of English.
6. No problem with single words, but it sometimes doesn't recognize longer sentences.
7. Who gave it such a high score? A complete waste of time.
8. Quite OK for beginners who have no idea about pronunciation. Such a high score is a bit exaggerated.

4.5.3. English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation

Judging by the comments about this particular app, it seems the students generally liked it. They praised the layout and the variety of functions it offered. However, there were some complaints about pop-up adds and some technical problems with recording function. The feedback left by students is as follows:

1. A simple layout, but plenty of features and options to choose from.
2. A free version much poorer than the paid one – the best contents are not free of charge, pity!

3. Adds, adds, adds everywhere!
4. Quite a nice app, a lot of options – but the commercials are so irritating...
5. It was OK – much better than Quick Pronunciation Tool or English Pronunciation – Correct Pronunciation. But not even quite as good as ELSA Speak or Pronounce It.
6. I couldn't record myself although the app was supposed to offer such an option.

4.5.4. Pronounce It

This particular app received mostly positive feedback. There were some reservations, especially when it comes to the layout or the limited number of functions. On the other hand, the application was praised for its English and American modes, lack of ads and the possibility of speech recordings. Here are the comments on the app left by students:

1. A nice app, it offers two modes: English and American. I was able to record my speech – which was also an advantage.
2. Quite a pleasant app, but I would change the layout for a bit more attractive
3. A good app – no adds and plenty of options in a free of charge version.
4. I could record myself but I there was no instant feedback on my pronunciation as it was with ELSA Speak.
5. Such a good app – it has everything a first year student of English philology may want, useful in learning English phonetics.
6. I guess it's nothing special after all – the layout is terrible (the colours!) and it's got limited functions.

4.5.5. Quick Pronunciation Tool

The app was generally appreciated by students. They pointed out at the fact that there are no pop-up ads (which is rather uncommon in unpaid versions of applications). Moreover, a choice between British and American pronunciation variant turned out to be an advantage. Still, some of the participants complained about the layout, limited options and a poor selection of pronunciation activities. The comments left on the app were as follows:

1. OK, but the layout is not very attractive. Not so many options.
2. Quite a nice app, I appreciate the fact that I could practise minimal pairs.
3. So-so. Elsa Speak is much better imo, especially when it comes to the layout and the amount of functions.
4. Not bad, a nice Wikipedia/Google Image Store component.
5. A poor selection of activities, but I was using a demo version so maybe that's the reason.
6. Could have been better, but in general I quite enjoyed using it.
7. No annoying pop-up ads – that's why I would recommend it!
8. Not the best app, but I appreciate the fact that there is a choice between British and American variant of pronunciation.

5. Discussion

The study's main aim is to address the need expressed by Levis (2019) and Rogerson-Revel (2021). The authors encouraged other scholars to conduct more research on modern technology tools that can be employed in pronunciation teaching and learning. Despite some valuable observations, the present study has certain limitations. To start with, the participants chosen for the apps testing were practically at the beginning of their phonetic course and they were unfamiliar with pronunciation apps. Hence, they relied on the teacher to choose the ones that would be suitable for them. The choice of the top five pronunciation apps available to download from Google Play Store was mostly motivated by their overall score (between 4,5/5 out of 5 stars, depending on the app) and their accessibility (students could test practically all of them without any additional costs). Although learners seemed to have appreciated the selection of pronunciation apps that they had not used before, it cannot be objectively stated if and – if yes – how such apps possibly influenced their pronunciation skills. Another important aspect is that the teacher could not control students' real engagement in the use of apps because testing took place outside classroom and the researcher was forced to rely only on the replies provided in the questionnaire. There was no additional delayed post-training questionnaire that would help to determine if the students still used the apps after the testing period or if they stopped doing so the moment they completed the questionnaire. Finally, for the purpose of conducting similar studies in the future, it would be reasonable to engage larger group of participants (the group of 20 English philology students who took part in this pilot study is not the amount that would make it possible to talk about any general tendency).

6. Pedagogical implications

The findings of the presented pilot study suggest that students are generally eager to use their mobile phone as a device for learning and they are willing to use various applications that could help them with their studies (including pronunciation apps that are supposed to enhance the process of acquiring the knowledge of phonemic transcription and the sound system). The results of this study confirm previous findings by Walesiak (2021) and strongly suggest that teachers (including phoneticians) should feel free to encourage students to do some work on their own because nowadays mobile devices and apps offer a wide range of possibilities for individual practise. However, it is advisable for teachers to select the apps more carefully so as to integrate their traditional course with additional materials (Stockwell, Hubbard, 2013). As teachers, we should also take the following aspects into account: the utility of a given app (pronunciation content), the type of feedback the app offers and the app's overall design and difficulty level (so as not to deter students).

7. Conclusion

This study explores students' perception on the use of mobile pronunciation apps available online. Although the findings should be treated as preliminary, they reveal that learners are aware of the existence of pronunciation apps and – with the teacher's help – know how to use them for pronunciation development. Moreover, learners willingly use mobile pronunciation apps in the process of individual learning. They also want teachers to incorporate apps into their classes. The results indicate that almost all apps tested by students received a lot of positive feedback, especially those that offered an option of recording student's own speech and offering instant feedback (such as Elsa Speak).

Using mobile apps makes the learning more convenient and accessible at hand – due to individual pace of learning, students may feel less stressed out. They can also control their progress all the time. This study may inspire language teachers to conduct their own research into students' engagement with mobile apps for L2 pronunciation training, at the same time making sure that these valuable tools are no longer ignored in the process of language teaching and learning.

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Appendix
Mobile pronunciation apps questionnaire

Dear Students, please complete the following questionnaire related to the use of mobile pronunciation applications. You can add your comments below each question.

1. Personal data:
Age: ………. Gender: ………… Field of study: …………………………………
Year of study: ……… University: ……………………………….
Self-assessed English level: ……….
Did you have any phonetic classes before the experiment? YES/NO
Were you familiar with pronunciation apps before the experiment? YES/NO

2. Choose the correct answers:
Q1: How often did you use the apps?

	EVERYDAY	2–4 TIMES A WEEK	ONCE A WEEK
ELSA SPEAK			
PRONOUNCE IT			
QUICK PRONUNCIATION TOOL			
ENG PRONUNCIATION – LEARN PRONUNCIATION			
ENG PRONUNCIATION – CORRECT PRONUNCIATION			

Would you like to leave a comment?

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Q2: Did you like the apps' overall design?

	YES, VERY MUCH	IT WAS OK	NO, NOT REALLY	NOT AT ALL
ELSA SPEAK				
PRONOUNCE IT				
QUICK PRONUN-CIATION TOOL				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – LEARN PRONUN-CIATION				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – CORRECT PRO-NUNCIATION				

Would you like to leave a comment?

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....……………………………………………………

Q3: Was the app difficult to use?

	VERY DIFFICULT	RATHER DIFFICULT	RATHER EASY	VERY EASY
ELSA SPEAK				
PRONOUNCE IT				
QUICK PRONUN-CIATION TOOL				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – LEARN PRONUNCIATION				
ENG PRONUNCIA-TION – CORRECT PRONUNCIATION				

Would you like to leave a comment?

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Q4: Do you think the app was useful for you as a student of English?

	YES, VERY MUCH	IT WAS OK	NO, NOT REALLY	NOT AT ALL
ELSA SPEAK				
PRONOUNCE IT				
QUICK PRONUN-CIATION TOOL				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – LE-ARN PRONUN-CIATION				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – COR-RECT PRONUN-CIATION				

Would you like to leave a comment?

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Q5: Would you recommend this app to other learners of English?

	DEFINITELY YES	RATHER YES	RATHER NOT	DEFINITELY NOT
ELSA SPEAK				
PRONOUNCE IT				
QUICK PRONUN-CIATION TOOL				
ENG PRONUN-CIATION – LEARN PRONUNCIATION				
ENG PRONUNCIA-TION – CORRECT PRONUNCIATION				

Would you like to leave a comment?

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THANK YOU :)

As soon as you complete the questionnaire, please send it back to

olka0207@op.pl

Streszczenie
Studencka ocena użyteczności korzystania z wybranych aplikacji mobilnych w procesie przyswajania wymowy w drugim języku – badanie pilotażowe

Powszechna dostępność i multimodalność nowoczesnych technologii czynią je szczególnie użytecznymi w procesie nauczania języka obcego, w tym nauczania wymowy. Sklep internetowy Google Play Store oferuje obecnie ponad 300 aplikacji do nauki wymowy angielskiej. Wiele z nich otrzymało wysokie oceny: od 4,5 do 4,9 na 5 możliwych. Większość z tych aplikacji jest dostępna za darmo. Ze względu na ich zdolność do zindywidualizowanego, dostosowanego do potrzeb ucznia, samodzielnego przyswajania wiedzy na zasadzie „anytime – anywhere" i automatycznej informacji zwrotnej na temat indywidualnych postępów aplikacje te zyskują coraz większą popularność wśród uczących się języka angielskiego na całym świecie. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono wyniki badania pilotażowego, w którym zbadano pięć najwyżej ocenianych darmowych aplikacji: Elsa Speak – Learning English Pronunciation firmy ELSA, English Pronunciation 2019 – Correct Pronunciation firmy Grounders, English Pronunciation – Learn Pronunciation firmy NVG Std, Pronounce It autorstwa Maclo Studios oraz Quick Pronunciation Tool autorstwa Tiago English Tutor. W badaniu wzięło udział 20 studentów pierwszego roku studiów licencjackich filologii angielskiej Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego. Studenci testowali pięć aplikacji i odpowiadali na pytania związane z ich wyglądem, użytecznością, potencjałem do samodzielnego uczenia się, nauczania i oceny wymowy. Wyniki badania ujawniły praktyczne zastosowania aplikacji przez uczących się oraz ich opinie na temat wartości wykorzystania tych aplikacji w procesie uczenia się i przyswajania wymowy angielskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie wymowy, uczenie się języka wspomagane komputerowo, aplikacje mobilne do nauki wymowy