

Autonomy in learning English pronunciation: the role of portfolios

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The article discusses portfolio-based autonomous learning of English pronunciation in the context of initial English language teacher education in the Czech Republic. More specifically, it introduces one possible conceptualisation of the portfolio as it was used at the University of Pardubice. This particular implementation reflects the socio-constructivist paradigm and also the reflective practitioner model of the teacher. Portfolios were deployed as a tool to strengthen coherence and integration among courses and, especially, to promote autonomy in the development of student teachers' English pronunciation. During a one-semester course they were expected to collect evidence documenting their autonomous learning, i.e. the learning tasks which they accomplished in order to improve selected aspects of their pronunciation. The content analysis of the portfolios revealed that the student teachers targeted both segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation through a considerable variety of tasks. Moreover, the analysis revealed a critical lack of autonomy, especially in relation to goal-setting and feedback strategies. In conclusion, the study acknowledged the potential of the portfolio to enhance autonomous learning of English pronunciation and also suggested possible changes in subsequent implementations of this tool.

Introduction

This article focuses on pronunciation, an important aspect of English, which, however, is marginalised both in the research and in English language teaching and learning (Pištora 131). In the context of initial teacher education, its importance is paramount since teachers are expected to have a knowledge base for teaching pronunciation and also “a high degree of intelligibility in the local pronunciation standard (e.g. British, American, or another regional variety of English)” and to “provide an appropriate, inspirational model for their students” (Brinton 248). Nevertheless, research results revealed that Czech teacher trainees, first-year university students at B2 level, “experienced numerous difficulties in the production of selected pronunciation features” (Ivanová 236). Referring to the outcomes of the conducted research, the article discusses the potential of an intervention, i.e. a portfolio, which was implemented to enhance teacher trainees' autonomous pronunciation learning.

1. Rationale

1.1 Issues in learning English pronunciation

Pronunciation standards have been discussed recently, which reflects increasing globalisation and the richness of the contexts in which English is used as a medium of communication. Rather than native-like pronunciation, intelligibility has become a generally accepted standard learners should aim for (Thornbury 170), since in the second language environment it is not a key issue “whether the interlocutors are speaking a standard variety of English but rather whether their pronunciation is *intelligible* for the effective exchange of ideas and information” (Brinton 251). The concept of intelligibility, however, is not easy to implement in classroom instruction; according to Pištora, teachers' uncertainty about the concept leads to avoiding pronunciation teaching or to focusing on segmentals (134). Some even find it ideologically biased, such as Rajagopalan, who claims that the arbitrary role of the native speaker is implicit in the concept and proposes its reconceptualisation (468). In spite of the trends towards accepting local pronunciation norms, there are many learners, Brinton asserts, who

“do aspire to native speaker models” (251). This finding is consistent with the results of surveys conducted in the Czech context among university students (Černá and Sheorey) and among student teachers of the English language (Černá et al. “Pronunciation”). Although for most students achieving a native-like pronunciation is an unrealistic goal, they set it themselves – the learners’ active role in determining the target accent is one of the conclusions which pronunciation specialists agree on (Brinton 251). Furthermore, such students do not necessarily have to aspire to reach a native-like level but they may refer to a native speaker norm in the process of learning, thus following the distinction made by Hewings (13) – the native speaker model is not used as a ‘target’ but a ‘point of reference’.

The question regarding the norm in pronunciation learning is inevitable. It is impossible for teachers and learners to (self-) assess the outcomes of learning without having a clearly defined norm to refer to. Furthermore, assessment and feedback are necessary to destabilise interlanguage and prevent fossilisation, i.e. they are prerequisites for an individual’s development. It may seem redundant to emphasise the importance of feedback in (language) learning, but the opposite is true. Goh and Burns argue that without appropriate feedback in speaking activities learners may become increasingly fluent through their involvement in group work, but their language does not necessarily increase in accuracy (18–19).

Considering the implications for initial English language teacher education, they are multiple. Firstly, developing all aspects of student teachers’ phonological competence should be included in the curriculum of the English language teacher education.

The phonological competence involves a knowledge of, and skill in the perception and production of

- the sound-units (*phonemes*) of the language and their realisation in particular contexts (*allophones*);
- the phonetic features which distinguish phonemes (*distinctive features*, e.g. voicing, rounding, nasality, plosion);
- the phonetic composition of words (*syllable structure*, the sequence of phonemes, word stress, word tones);
- sentence phonetics (*prosody*): sentence stress and rhythm, intonation;
- phonetic reduction: vowel reduction, strong and weak forms, assimilation, elision. (Council of Europe 116-117).

Furthermore, there should be institutional consensus regarding the pronunciation standard so that student teachers receive consistent feedback – Received Pronunciation (a variety of English historically associated with the British Broadcasting Corporation) and General American remain the two major native-speaker target models according to pronunciation specialists (Brinton 251).

Secondly, teacher trainees should learn to plan a pronunciation-oriented lesson, which involves considering learner needs especially in relation to the aims, the subject matter, teaching methods, techniques and strategies (including ways of providing feedback), and teaching aids. Reflecting on their own experience of learning English pronunciation may improve their ability to employ appropriate methodologies for addressing pronunciation in the classroom.

Lastly, student teachers should be aware of their attitudes to and beliefs about learning English pronunciation, including their own. Negative attitudes or perceiving pronunciation as

an unimportant aspect of English may have a negative influence on student teachers' willingness to work on their pronunciation and their developing professional philosophies.

1.2 Learner autonomy

This article discusses teacher trainees' learning of English pronunciation. They are advanced adult learners with diverse pronunciation needs, not all of which can be or should be accommodated in lessons at the university. Therefore, student teachers are expected to learn autonomously.

The concept of learner autonomy is introduced first. Holec, who defined it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (3), provided the foundational definition of learner autonomy. To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. Building on the definition by Holec, an autonomous language learner is capable of: (a) determining the objectives; (b) defining the contents and progressions; (c) selecting the methods and techniques to be used; (d) monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and (e) evaluating what has been acquired (3).

Sinclair (7–17) further elaborated the concept; she emphasised the importance of the willingness of learners to become responsible for their learning. She quotes Little, who claims that learner autonomy "presupposes a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning" (Little in Sinclair 7). A change of attitude is the first step towards procedures referred to as "learner training" or "learning to learn".

Regarding the perceptions of learner autonomy, the 1990s witnessed a remarkable shift, since "more and more national curricula came to include learner autonomy as a key goal" (Little 14). In the Czech educational context, this happened a decade later, when the curricular reform implemented a new system of curricular documents, i.e. *Framework Educational Programmes* for pre-primary, basic, and upper-secondary education. Consequently, key competencies were introduced as the general aim of education, including English language education. Learner autonomy, included in learning and problem-solving competencies (MŠMT 10–11), has become a valued goal. Thus, if teachers are supposed to educate autonomous learners at schools, they should become autonomous themselves. This is best accomplished through experiential learning. Therefore, reflecting the change of educational aims, initial teacher education should implement pedagogies which are embedded in constructivist theories of learning, because those theories underlie the concept of learner autonomy (Little 16). Little suggests that in contexts of formal learning we should try to facilitate learners' construction of knowledge by "adopting pedagogical procedures that are exploratory, interpretative and participatory" (20). He further maintains that such procedures allow learners to assume new discourse roles, through which they are drawn into reflection on the content and process of their learning (ibid.). Consequently, portfolios were chosen as a procedure that meets the criteria formulated above.

1.3 Portfolio

Considering a number of definitions, Pišová claims that there is a consensus in the relevant literature that a portfolio is "a set of materials/documents/artefacts, which is structured, selective, representative, and comprehensible to the audience" (40). The remaining features depend on the theoretical background which underlies a certain implementation of the

portfolio in a unique context. Theoretical underpinnings relevant to this article are discussed in the next paragraph.

As regards this particular use of portfolios in initial teacher education at the University of Pardubice, it reflects the socio-constructivist paradigm and the model of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. Apart from recognising its potential for deep reflection, there are other theoretical foundations which inform the implementation. We agree with Shulman, who proposes that one of the main assets of a portfolio is that it is embedded in the content of education (31–32) and through materials/documents/artefacts, the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is manifested. Furthermore, our conceptualisation of a portfolio utilises its potential to integrate courses – tight coherence and integration among courses is considered one of the critically important cornerstones in teacher education (Darling-Hammond 549). On top of that, because of its characteristics (Little 20), a portfolio is seen as a pedagogical procedure which is likely to develop autonomy in learners.

In conclusion, a portfolio was implemented as a “developmental portfolio” (Pířová 42), which means that the process of creating the portfolio was more important than the final product.

2. The Study

The present study investigates the implementation of a portfolio as a tool supporting student teachers' autonomy in pronunciation learning, as well as the integration of courses in teacher education at the University of Pardubice. Portfolios were deployed in the second semester of the bachelor's study programme with the purpose of integrating three courses in the communicative and linguistic module, more specifically the *Language Development II* course (development of all aspects of communicative competence), *Speaking Skills II* course (focusing on monologic production and spoken interaction), and *Phonetics and Phonology* course (focusing on both theory and practice). Furthermore, it was used to enhance the students' autonomy, reflecting their diverse needs in pronunciation learning, which were diagnosed in the preceding semester.

Formally, creating a portfolio was a requirement for the *Speaking Skills II* course. The level of the university tutors' control over the process was moderate; the tutors exercised their control through assigning a set of structured tasks, which were compulsory. Through doing that, the tutors modelled possible techniques suitable for pronunciation learning. The tutors specified the type of task to do, e.g. imitation, telling a story, describing pictures and actions, or teaching a mini-lesson, rather than specific content to cover. Particular tasks were assigned to encourage the students to ask for and provide peer feedback, e.g. a study party. When documenting their progress, the students produced their own audio or video recordings. In spite of a certain level of control, the students' choice of aims and content or cooperation patterns was often unrestricted.

Furthermore, the students were obliged to work on their pronunciation autonomously. Every student went through the diagnostic process in the first semester; thus, at the beginning of the second semester, they could rely on the following sources of information: (a) the tutors' feedback which they received during and after the *Language Development I* course; (b) the tutors' feedback on their initial recording; (c) their self-assessment of their initial recording. Presumably, entering the second semester, the student teachers should be well aware of their needs in pronunciation development. In addition to engaging in mandatory tasks, the students were responsible for optional activities, i.e. for their own decisions regarding what to learn,

when to learn, and how to learn and get feedback. In the course of the semester, they were expected to maintain autonomous learning but the number of optional tasks was not specified. Apart from collecting evidence on the learning process, the portfolio enabled the student teachers to reflect on it. An interview conducted at the end of the semester provided the student teachers with space to verbalise the experience and to self-evaluate and formulate action points for further learning.

2.1 Research Aims

The aim of the study is to answer the following questions:

1. What types of tasks did the student teachers use to improve their pronunciation?
2. Did they pursue clearly defined goals?
3. What specific pronunciation features did they focus on?
4. Did the student teachers receive feedback on their task performance?
5. What was the source of the feedback?

2.2 Research sample

The respondents in the study were all the students in the English for Education study programme at the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of the University of Pardubice who entered the second semester of their studies in spring 2011. Out of the 34 students, ten students were male, 24 female.

2.3 Research methodology

In order to answer the research questions, content analysis was selected as an appropriate method; a learning task was taken as the meaningful unit of analysis (Gavora 118). Learner autonomy was operationalised through goal-setting, choice of tasks, and feedback strategies. The student teachers' portfolios were examined from the points of view of goal-orientedness and specificity. Each task was rated either as goal-oriented (G), if an expected outcome was obvious, or without a clear goal orientation (nG). Similarly, tasks with a specific pronunciation-related focus (S) were distinguished from those developing more complex abilities (nS), e.g. an ability to sustain a monologue. The tasks which targeted other aspects of English, e.g. translation or writing, were marked as irrelevant. Moreover, the researchers also investigated whether the student teachers sought feedback on their task performance and what the sources of feedback were. Two researchers conducted the content analysis; the level of agreement was 82 per cent, which they considered satisfactory. Partial results were presented in the context of a larger project; the presentation put the emphasis on reporting the results of the assessment of the student teachers' pronunciation (Černá et al. "Implementation").

2.4 Results and discussion

The portfolios of the 34 student teachers contained 345 optional tasks, which were subjected to analysis. The number of tasks the student teachers documented ranged from seven to 18 tasks per student (mean=10.2).

Regarding the types of tasks, there were differences among individual respondents. While some of them tended to repeat the same or a similar task with different content, others engaged in a variety of tasks. The number of different types of activities ranged from three to ten (mean=6.1). Nevertheless, the variation is remarkable if one considers the whole cohort

(see Table 1). Apart from the types of tasks which the tutors modelled (see Table 1, types of tasks in italics), the respondents accomplished a range of tasks building on different modes of learning, e.g. exchanging voice e-mails with a native speaker or paired reading with a native speaker model. The tasks targeted reception, production, or a combination of reception and production of speech or selected pronunciation features. Moreover, specific types of tasks appeared in the portfolios, reflecting individual respondents' needs (e.g. reliance on IPA; teaching somebody to facilitate their own understanding of the feature).

Table 1

Portfolio analysis: types of tasks by focus

Focus	Type of task
Reception	Contrasting and comparing minimal pairs Watching TV series, videos, films Listening to songs Listening tests
Production	Reading aloud without a model <i>Telling a story</i> <i>Describing a picture</i> <i>Describing action</i> <i>Speaking about a selected topic for a period of time</i> Singing songs Rapping Rehearsing (e.g. difficult words) before a presentation Rehearsing before an interview
Reception & production	<i>Listening to and imitating audio/video NS input</i> Listening to and imitating tongue twisters Listening to and imitating limericks/poems Reading aloud after an NS model Paired reading with an NS model Interacting face-to-face with non-NSs Interacting face-to-face with NSs Interacting with NSs via Skype Interacting with NSs via voice e-mail
Other	Transcribing words using IPA <i>Teaching pronunciation (explanation, modelling, feedback)</i>

A closer look at the types of tasks which the respondents performed to improve their pronunciation implies that the role of ICT in the autonomous learning of English pronunciation is substantial. The internet functioned as a source of native speaker input for all the reception-oriented tasks, as well as for those combining reception and production, i.e. listen-and-imitate types of task. The internet also facilitated the student teachers' access to audio books upon which they built their learning tasks (e.g. reading after/with a native speaker model). Reading aloud tasks represented the respondents' preferred choice, though the tutors had not modelled this type of task in the course. Such tasks require orthographic competence for action, which is a different target. The respondents might have been influenced by their experience as school learners, since reading aloud is an activity that is widely used in English lessons.

Using the internet as a source of content is self-evident. More importantly, the student teachers exploited the interactive potential of ICT: (a) they searched for specialist websites which enabled them to record their own speech and get feedback on their performance; (b) they interacted with native speakers of English, which substituted for a lack of opportunities to communicate face-to-face; (c) they interacted via voice e-mail, through which they also obtained feedback.

In conclusion, the student teachers manifested a considerable level of autonomy in learning English pronunciation through utilising a variety of tasks, the majority of which were dependent on the use of ICT.

As concerns goal-orientedness and specificity, the results show (see Figure 1) that 37 per cent of the tasks were goal-oriented and at the same time focused on specific pronunciation features (G+S); this category includes activities such as, for example, practising production of dental fricatives (/ð/, /θ/) in fluent speech using a web-based application. The highest proportion of the tasks (45%) did not pursue a clearly defined goal and at the same time did not focus on specific aspects of pronunciation, e.g. non-specified reading aloud or watching TV series. The remaining 15 per cent of the tasks were either irrelevant because they focused on other aspects of English (12%) or lacked either goal-orientedness (1%) or specificity (5%).

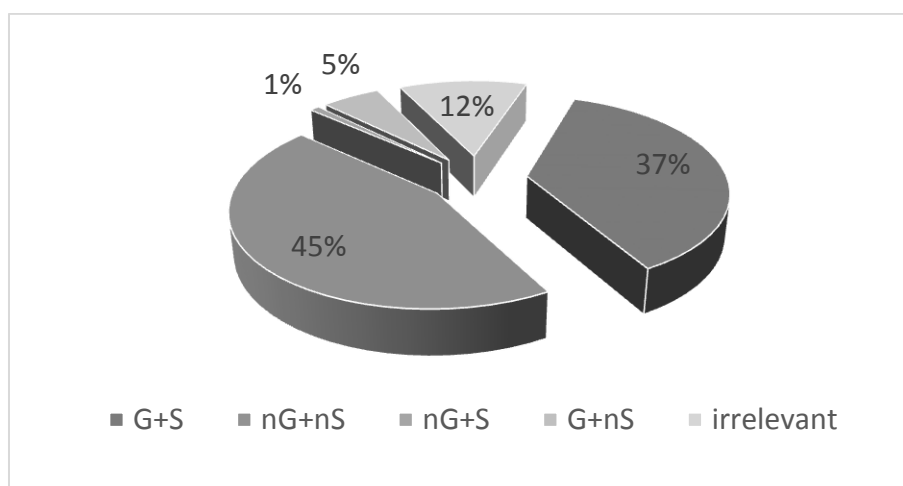


Figure 1. Types of tasks by goal-orientedness and specificity

Since the ability to state the aim of learning is one of the characteristics of an autonomous learner, only the goal-oriented tasks focusing on specific pronunciation features will be analysed.

The results suggest that not all the student teachers were able to set a goal and choose the focus of the task properly. The analysis revealed that 127 tasks (37% G+S tasks) were accomplished by 85 per cent of the respondents, i.e. by 28 out of the 34 student teachers. Each of them completed one to nine G+S tasks (mean=4.7; median 4.5).

Regarding specificity, the tasks targeted both segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation features; they were aimed at either reception or production of those features or at the combination of both processes. Out of 127 tasks, 54 per cent focused on segmental features, 34 per cent on suprasegmental features, and 12 per cent on the pronunciation of particular

words which the student teachers perceived as difficult. The results reveal the student teachers' prevailing focus on individual sounds rather than on prosody. This may reflect their own perceptions of their English pronunciation problems. Interestingly, the list of features corresponds to those that were identified as potentially problematic for Czech learners of English as a result of the differences between the phonological and phonetic systems of English and Czech (Černá et al., "Pronunciation"). Moreover, student teachers may attach higher importance to the segmental features compared to prosody. This is consistent with the findings presented by Pištora (136), who reported a massive preponderance of segmental features in his survey among Czech teachers and student teachers of English.

Figure 2 below summarises which individual sounds were targeted by the student teachers. Obviously, the respondents frequently set voiced and voiceless dental fricatives (/ð/, /θ/) as a goal of their autonomous learning. Since these sounds do not have phonological equivalents in standard Czech, the student teachers probably considered them difficult and felt a need to practise them. This was confirmed by the assessment of the respondents' recordings, which revealed that the two sounds, especially the voiced one, represented a major problem of the respondents (Černá et al., "Implementation"). Contrary to that, faulty realisation of some other individual sounds was not reflected in the student teachers' set goals; for example, incorrect pronunciation of the ash /æ/, velar nasal /ŋ/, and voiced endings prevailed (ibid.) but the student teachers' focus on those features was minimal – ten tasks altogether (see Figure 2). Conversely, there were features, e.g. the bilabial approximant /w/, which were pronounced correctly (ibid.) but still selected as a learning goal.

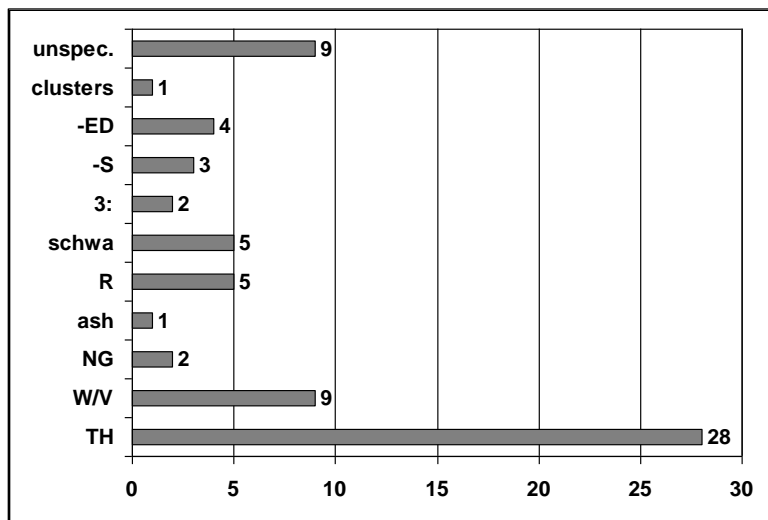


Figure 2. Segmental pronunciation features targeted by the student teachers

The results indicate that the student teachers' ability to set a specific goal to pursue autonomously is critical. Though about a third of tasks were goal-oriented and specific, further analysis uncovered a discrepancy between the student teachers' pronunciation needs and their set goals. The reasons may be multiple: (a) a low level of the student teachers' awareness of their pronunciation needs in spite of the tutors' interventions (integration among courses through portfolios, audio recording, continuous feedback, self-assessment, modelling learning techniques); (b) the student teachers' lack of experience of goal-setting; (c) difficulty in matching the content and the aim; (d) the student teachers' reluctance to take charge of their pronunciation learning. A variety of reasons undoubtedly apply to individual student teachers; some respondents reflected on them in the interviews, but this does not, however, lie within the focus of the study.

Apart from setting a specific goal and choosing a relevant task to achieve the goal, autonomous learners should also be able to evaluate the outcomes of the learning process. Therefore, getting feedback is essential. All the tasks in the student teachers' portfolios were investigated from the point of view of feedback. The analysis pointed out that only 20 per cent of the tasks included a way of providing feedback.

Sources of feedback are presented in Figure 3. Audio recording (58 occurrences) is a dominant source which is relevant to pronunciation learning. Other sources of feedback were not exploited much, although some of them were at hand, for example, peer feedback. It is obvious that the availability of ICT, including mobile technologies, increases the opportunities to get feedback on one's own performance. Nevertheless, in this particular case only some student teachers used specialised software which compared their speech with a model and highlighted incorrect pronunciation. Furthermore, one respondent used video recording. Surprisingly, the student teachers did not ask their peers for feedback, though the tutors encouraged them to engage in cooperative learning to benefit from peer feedback. This may be related to the respondents' preference for the native speaker pronunciation model (Černá et al., "Pronunciation"), as a result of which they do not consider their peers to be a reliable source of feedback on their pronunciation.

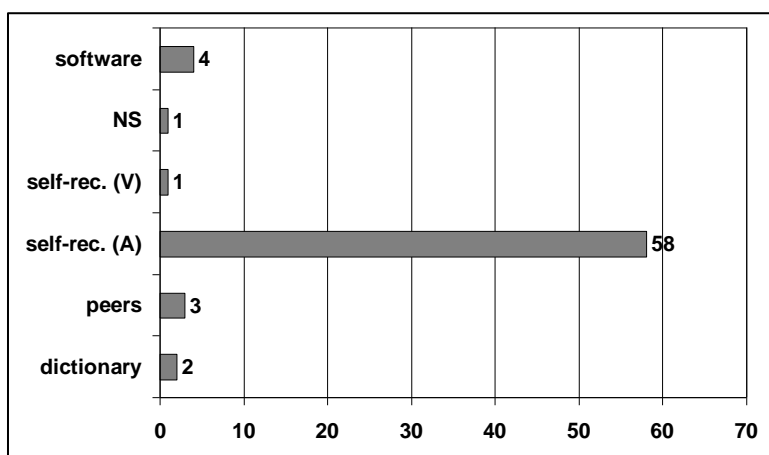


Figure 3. Sources of feedback in autonomous learning

Conclusion

The research results may be summarised as follows. (1) The student teachers used a variety of learning tasks to improve their pronunciation. The analysis showed that ICT enhanced their learning considerably; not only did the student teachers use the internet as a source of content (videos, audio recordings of all kinds, learning tasks), but they also built on the interactive potential of ICT. (2) Goal-setting appeared to be a major issue; only 37 per cent of the tasks headed towards a defined goal. Furthermore, when those tasks were analysed, a considerable discrepancy appeared between diagnosed learner needs and learning tasks – the student teachers focused on certain features which were not problematic at all or neglected faulty pronunciation of some others. (3) Regarding specific pronunciation features, in the tasks that were analysed, a focus on segmental features prevailed (54%), voiced and voiceless dental fricatives (/ð/, /θ/) being the most frequently practised individual sounds. (4) Getting feedback was a key issue as well; only 20 per cent of the tasks included feedback strategies. (5) It may be viewed positively that some of the strategies were quite innovative, for example, using

specialised software. In general, the student teachers primarily used various technologies rather than peer feedback.

It is obvious from the results that there were individual differences in the levels of autonomy among the student teachers. Overall, it may be concluded that the level of autonomy was quite high in terms of methods and techniques; the student teachers were able to plan and execute various tasks. Nevertheless, they mostly failed to define the goals of their learning and evaluate their progress, which is impossible without feedback.

Determining one's targets is a critical aspect of becoming an autonomous learner. If learners do not know where they are heading, their choice of methods, techniques, and feedback strategies may be irrelevant. Consequently, the learning experience as a whole may be perceived as ineffective or even demotivating if the target and subsequent decisions are not in alignment.

The results imply possible recommendations to improve the implementation of the portfolio. First, in the diagnostic phase preceding the procedure, student teachers should also become aware of their attitudes to learning English pronunciation. Possible negative attitudes, i.e. barriers to improvement, might be challenged in courses. Second, an explicit focus on aims and feedback strategies in courses may improve student teachers' ability to set their personal goals of learning English pronunciation and evaluate the outcomes of their learning. Lastly, in the course of implementation it is desirable to use strategies promoting interpersonal interaction, such as organising monthly sessions in which student teachers engage in portfolio-based reflection on their learning process.

In conclusion, portfolios turned out to be a powerful intervention in the student teachers' professional development because of their potential to interrelate the focus on pronunciation with the development of learner autonomy. The article discusses a specific example of a procedure leading to the development of learner autonomy, which has been declared a key goal of education, but its "realisation [...] remains elusive" (Little 15).

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