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Difficulties to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/ as EFL students in the second semester 2013, belonging to the Saturday program of the English Major at UNAN-MANAGUA

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To our parents, children and teachers who have
been guides to our lives and support to all our dreams.

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The Authors.

Abstract

One major concern about the EFL Saturday courses at UNAN-Managua is if the students are acquiring a good level of proficiency on pronunciation. It is a strong belief that EFL learners have great difficulties on pronunciation due to negative transfer; especially with difficult twin sounds which do not have an equivalent in the mother tongue of non-native speakers. This research was applied to a group of 15 students of the Saturday program of the English Major at UNAN. To this purpose were applied one survey to the students, two interviews, and several class observations. There were interesting findings about the subject and the most important is the concern to create phonological awareness in the students to improve their pronunciation.

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Difficulties to Identify and Pronounce the Sounds /s/ and /z/ as EFL students

English language has been and it is nowadays one of the most important languages in the world; especially with its growing use in the educational and working fields. However, some deficiencies have been observed through the years regarding pronunciation in EFL courses. Therefore, it has become a significant bias to a successful communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, but especially between non-native speaker because of the diversity of pronunciation errors that can be found even in a single EFL classroom, so it clearly lead to unintelligibility.

Pronunciation is by far the most important sub-skill of speaking because a speaker with good pronunciation can be intelligible despite errors in other sub-skills such as grammar and vocabulary. However, a speaker with poor pronunciation can be very difficult to understand despite his/her accuracy in other areas of speaking. In spite its great importance, pronunciation teaching has been underestimated and it has taken different level of importance in the different moments of English teaching history.

In the old fashioned Grammar-Translation method pronunciation was seen as irrelevant and it was almost never taught. Lately in the 50's and 60's with the birth of the Audio-lingual method pronunciation took a main place through repetition of sounds and sounds combinations, however it fails in taking into account the suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation. In the 70's with the communicative approach English teachers have the dilemma of teaching pronunciation through articulatory phonetics or not offering any explicit instruction (modeling), so pronunciation seems do not have a place into this approach.

There are several phonemes or twin sounds that represent a bias to intelligibility between EFL learners. The phonemes /s/ and /z/ are part of these difficult sounds that are uneasy to recognize and pronounce for non-native speakers. The purpose of this work is to find out the difficulties that EFL learners have about these sounds and to provide some recommendations to improve the pronunciation of these phonemes. The ideal way to teach and correct pronunciation to EFL learners has not determined and in an effort to contribute

to this subject this work is presented with the hope that pronunciation takes an important place and a central role inside our EFL classrooms.

Problem

Why the EFL students at UNAN have difficulties to identify and pronounce the sound /s/ and /z/?

Sub- Problem:

EFL learners at UNAN tend to not recognize strategies to identify the sounds /s/ and /z/.

EFL learners at UNAN seldom manage the phonetic differences between /s/ and /z/.

Topic

“S” vs. “Z”: Difficulties to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/ as EFL students in the second semester -2013, belonging to the Saturday program of the English Major at UNAN-MANAGUA.

Rationale

The present research is presented with the expectation that EFL students and teachers of the Saturday program at UNAN-Managua can recognize and try to overcome the weaknesses of the curriculum in regards to pronunciation. Historically pronunciation and mainly phonetics has been underestimated and neglected by teachers and students, despite its great importance to achieve an intelligible communication.

Nowadays the tendency and goal is to reach an acceptable level of intelligibility in oral communication between EFL speakers in contrast with the former goal that was to reach a native like pronunciation through rhythm and intonation. It is necessary to call the attention to the importance of making to EFL learners aware of the role of pronunciation and phonetics to develop the speaking skill. UNAN as one of the most important universities in Nicaragua and home of hundreds of English's students every year must be a pioneer and a guide in the improvement of pronunciation teaching. Therefore, it should be considered as one of the keywords in the achievement of the excellence in English proficiency.

The purpose is not sacrificing fluency, but to improve in all the areas of English communication through the study and practice of an accurate pronunciation. This work is intended to know the main difficulties to identify and pronounce the English phonemes /s/ and /z/ in order to bring some light to this subject and to improve and develop a pronunciation curriculum more adequate to the current necessities of the students and professionals.

Hypothesis

The effects of native language on teaching-learning process difficult the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ sounds.

Research Question vs. Problem

Is the mother tongue a bias in the learning of sound /s/ and /z/?

Is the teacher correction and self-correction a bias for fluency?

What are the phonetics differences between /s/ and /z/ sound?

Are there rules in the use of /s/ and /z/ sounds?

What are the teaching learning strategies to improve the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/?

What are the importance of distinguish both sound?

How the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ affect in the semantic of words?

General Objective

Identify the difficulties of EFL students to recognize the phonetic differences between sounds /s/ and /z/.

Specific Objectives

Identify the difficulties of EFL students to recognize and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/.

Recognize strategies of teaching-learning the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ sound.

Recommend some tips to help to EFL students to improve the pronunciation the /s/ and /z/ sounds.

To know strategies applied by the teacher to correct phonetic errors.

Theoretical Framework

Speech

Speech is the basis of communication, is the oral environment through which we do understand those around us and has elements such as fluency, intonation and volume of voice. Speech is defined by the dictionary of the sciences of education as "the language of individual realization - general model - at any given time by any member of a linguistic community. Is a single act by which a subject expresses a particular message by selecting the linguistic code rules and signs need to apply in that situation ... can be considered as the implementation language or language upgrade potential possessed by the subject." Speech is the ability to express thoughts, desires and ideas regardless of the linguistic code that is used for communication. Phonology is the study of the sounds of speech, and how they function to help us convey meaning in language.

Pronunciation Teaching

Pronunciation is the way a word or a language is spoken, or the manner in which someone utters a word. If one is said to have "correct pronunciation", then it refers to both within a particular dialect. A word can be spoken in different ways by various individuals or groups, depending on many factors, such as: the duration of the cultural exposure of their childhood, the location of their current residence, speech or voice disorders, their ethnic group, their social class, or their education. Pronunciation is one of the most important skills in English Language Teaching. If speakers have very bad pronunciation, their speech will not be understandable to the listeners. There are several techniques for teaching pronunciation such as sound discrimination, listen-and-repeat, tongue twister, communicative practice, teacher demonstration, teacher explanation, and drama and role plays. Pronunciation is also a graphic representation of the way a word is spoken, using phonetic symbols. "We are comfortable teaching reading, writing, listening and to a degree,

general oral skills, but when it comes to pronunciation we often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics” (Dalton, 1997).

Some studies claim that the majority of linguists give more importance to suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation regarding English pronunciation while EFL teachers and learners consider that segmental features such as vowels and consonants are more important to produce an intelligible communication. Moedjito (2008) found out that “all of them preferred segmental features (vowels and consonants) as their priority because they found that there was a significant difference between the system of English pronunciation and that of learners’ mother tongue” that means EFL learners and teachers feel that vowels and consonants’ phonetics are more useful than rhythm and intonation when talk about pronunciation. Therefore, they are more concerned about these segmental features than about the suprasegmental ones.

However, this scenario contrasts with the actual instructional trend of pronunciation in EFL classrooms. Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty (1985) claim that the priority order of pronunciation teaching should be fluency, stress, rhythm and intonation, and vowels and consonants. Consequently, should be carefully analyzed how much emphasis must get the study and practice of phonetics in detriment of the so much wanted fluency. Hall cited in Gilakjani 2011 states “one cannot deny the importance of phonemic discrimination”, but the question is how much fluency should be sacrificed while phonemic accuracy is gotten.

Phonetic Teaching

The following phonemic chart shows the vowels and consonants sounds of English. This kind of chart is very useful to develop the teaching of phonetic mainly in the first stages of pronunciation learning when should be created the consciousness that great part of pronunciation intelligibility lays on phonetics. As Smith (2005) claims “Phonetic signs are most valuable in the teaching of English, and should be taught fairly early in the course” However there is a discussion about if phonetic should be taught before or after the

learner have learnt the alphabet. Smith says that it is preferable to know how to spell and pronounce English words; even though the phonetic should be taught in order to the teacher is able to illustrate any phonetic word and the student is able to catch the explanation.

ɪ READ	ɪ SIT	ʊ BOOK	u: TOO	ɪə HERE	eɪ DAY	John & Sarah Free Materials 1996	
e MEN	ə AMERICA	ɜ: WORD	ɔ: SORT	ʊə TOUR	ɔɪ BOY	əʊ GO	
æ CAT	ʌ BUT	ɑ: PART	ɒ NOT	eə WEAR	aɪ MY	aʊ HOW	
p PIG	b BED	t TIME	d DO	tʃ CHURCH	dʒ JUDGE	k KILO	g GO
f FIVE	v VERY	θ THINK	ð THE	s SIX	z ZOO	ʃ SHORT	ʒ CASUAL
m MILK	n NO	ŋ SING	h HELLO	l LIVE	r READ	w WINDOW	j YES

In order to improve pronunciation teaching the curriculum for teaching English should be redefined to include the study of pronunciation and phonetics which have been neglected for years. “It should include consistent and systematic work on phonetic and phonological aspects of the language, laying much more emphasis upon correct pronunciation and introducing phonemic transcription” (Nikolov, Mijaljevic, Lundberg, Flanagan and Mattheoudakis, 2007, page 121)

Pronunciation Problems in EFL

Language teaching and mainly pronunciation teaching is complicated by the fact that non-native EFL teachers and native teachers evaluate errors differently. For instance, many foreign features of English that are always noticed by native English teachers keep unheard by EFL teachers. However, there is a great diversity of English pronunciation among native speakers depending on the different language backgrounds or origins; making more difficult the pronunciation teaching. Therefore, a part of the speech of a non-native speaker may sound strange to a native speaker, but he cannot be sure whether it is wrong or why it sounds strange. Sajavaara & Dufva (2001) argue that “in communicative interaction, the roles of the speaker and the hearer alternate, and it may be more often the case that the communicative performance fails because of the hearer's inability to understand what the other party is saying.” So to be able to keep a successful conversation, the speaker must produce intelligible output, but equally important is correctly decode what he hears.

Dalton (1997) states that despite pronunciation it is commonly focused in production, the main problem affecting to EFL learners is the reception because we cannot say, what we do not hear.

Moreover, if the "English" sound is not clearly received, the brain of the learner converts it into the closest sound in their own language. Thus the dental English fricative /ð/ in "those", becomes converted by Spanish speakers into the dentalised Spanish /d/, producing "dose" as this is what the speaker hears. Given this reality, it would seem logical to place a heavy emphasis on listening (reception) as a way into releasing appropriate pronunciation (production).

Interference of L1 in L2

First language is called by different names such as native language, primary language and mother tongue which is assumed to be the language acquired during early childhood, starting before the age of 3 years and a second language is typically an official or societal dominant language (e.g. English) needed for education, employment and other basic purposes. As is said “the first language interferes in the acquisition of the second language and it is applicable universally” (Sinha, Banerjee, Sinha and Shastri, 2009).

A principle applies on both first and second language acquisition, which states that, the differences in terms of processing capacities leads to interference. The contrastive analysis hypothesis argues that the structures and shapes of the first language of an individual are different from those of the second language and that could create errors in speaking. When there is a sound in the target language, which is absent from the learners’ native sound system, or vice versa, learners may not be able to produce or even perceive the sound. This process is known as equivalence classification which can lead to obstruction of the establishment of new phonetic categories for similar sounds.

In Interaction hypothesis bilinguals are fully unable to separate the L1 and L2 phonetic systems, necessarily interacting with each other. To the L2 user, however, difficulties of comprehension caused in part by phonetic and phonological factors can certainly be as problematic in the everyday use of the L2 as the difficulty in making oneself understood due to non-native pronunciation. (Sinha et al, 2009)

As a result the communication between an EFL speaker and a native speaker and even between two EFL speakers can be difficult, unsuccessful and sometimes annoying. Besides, the interaction between non native speakers is a reality due to business globalization and abroad studies, so it is a necessity improve our pronunciation and phonetic accuracy to reach an acceptable level of communication. As it is claimed “In pronunciation teaching, the goal is neither to help learners to attain native-like accents nor to promote comfortable

intelligibility to native speakers, but to ensure mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers of English” (Jenkins, 2000)

But not always the interference of L1 in L2 can be considered as negative. There is a positive transfer that allows to EFL learners use their native language as a guide to internalize and better understand the target language. Hongqin (2009) claims “Positive transfer occurs when a native form is used in the production of an L2 utterance, and it is also a part of the L2 norm. Here the role of transfer is facilitative.”

Exposure to Target Language

It might refer to their current day-to-day life as well as the amount of prior instruction a learner received in the target language. Language learning theories states that learners acquire language mainly from the input they received and they should receive a large amount of comprehensible input before expect a good performance of the language. Therefore, initial focus on listening without pressure to speak gives the learners the opportunity to internalize the target sound system. When learners do speak later on, their pronunciation is supposedly quite good despite their never have received explicit pronunciation instruction. However, “target language exposure is necessary, but not sufficient to guarantee target language learning, since target language input must become intake” (Ellis cited in Turnbull & Dailey, 2009, page 5). Therefore, the exposure to the target language will be useful accordingly to the way the learners internalize the target language input. If the learner do not internalize and understand the target language, it will be wasted in some way.

Mostly, adult learners have little opportunity to surround themselves with the native target language input and they are likely to live and work in environments with little or none exposure to the target language which inhibit their acquisition and difficult the development of an adequate pronunciation, in other words without a good input cannot be expected a good result. Therefore, as exposure to target language becomes such an important factor to determine the success of EFL students, especially in EFL settings where

they have little opportunity to surround themselves with the target language; the responsibility would fall on the teacher in order to provide an adequate and accurate model of the target language. In the same way the teacher should encourage to students to use the target language out of class in conversational way.

Minimal Pairs and Phoneme

A minimal pair is a pair of words with only one phonemic difference. In order to recognize a minimal pair it is necessary to know the sounds that make up the word and ignore its spelling. So a minimal pair has only one phoneme that distinguish one word from another word; taking into account that a phoneme is the smallest sound unit in a language that is capable of conveying a different meaning, it is possible to claim that awareness of this phonetic difference is crucial to develop pronunciation learning. Also the capacity to recognize and pronounce the voiced and voiceless sounds constitute another major problem as Brown (1991, page 120) states “The voiced/voiceless distinction is therefore clearly the most important consonant barrier to intelligibility...” thus if EFL learners are not aware of which are the voiced and voiceless consonants sounds and how they affect the pronunciation and meaning of words, especially minimal pairs, it can be very easy to tend to commit mistakes and being unintelligible to hearers. For example the word **knees** (ni:z) versus the word **niece** (ni:s), they are so different in meaning than is an EFL student says “I Love your knees (ni:z)”, but it is pronounced as “I love your niece (ni:s)” the meaning is lost and it can lead to a big misunderstanding and a severe bias to communication.

The Sounds /s/ and /z/

During an interview with an expert linguist P. Vásquez (personal communication, October 24, 2013) was discerned that the big problem on the distinction of twin sounds is the fact that the articulation of these sounds is almost identical. They have the same manner and the same place of articulation the only difference is the dimension of voicing. The sound /s/ is voiceless while its counterpart /z/ is voiced.

Besides the sound /z/ does not have an equivalent in Spanish phonetic. He states that some of the examples of minimal pairs with this sounds that tend to confused to the students are Sue/Zoo, Sip/Zip, Hiss/His, Niece/Knees and Rice/Rise where the first are pronounced with /s/and the last ones with /z/.

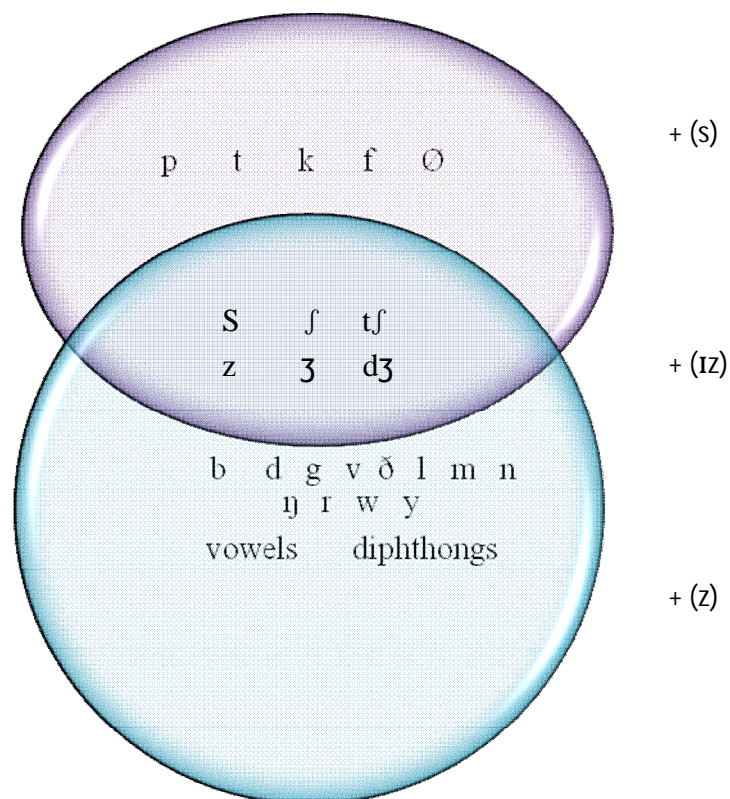
How to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/

Vásquez provided us some interesting tips about how to recognize when to use one sound or another. Firstly, /z/ should be used when it is conjugated the verbs in the 3rd person of singular. Another tip is that generally the words that are spelled with the letter S between two vowels sounds should be pronounce as /z/; of course that for any rules there are exceptions. Another advice is to be aware that there are words that are spelled with S, but they are pronounced with /z/, and when the word is used as a noun or as a verb. For example:

/S/	/Z/
Increase (noun), Increase (verb)	-
Use (noun)	Use (verb)
Close (noun)	Close (verb)
Excuse (noun)	Excuse (verb)
-	Resort (noun), Resort (verb)

During the entire interview he emphasized that the most important thing is to create the phonological awareness in the students in to they are capable to apply these rules in a conscious way and internalize this knowledge. This is the only way to learn phonetic.

Finally Vázquez shared one diagram that he created. It is very useful to anyone who wants to practice the recognition and pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/.



Error correction on pronunciation

Error correction research can be traced to the decades of 70s and 80s; however, it gained strength with the birth of the concept of Focus on Form around the 90s. However, there is not strong empirical evidence about this topic so it should be seen in some way as speculative. Focus on form look for a careful pre-selection of the structures to be learned with little concern about the communication of real meanings.

There are some considerations to take into account when we talk about error correction of pronunciation such as planned or incidental correction, selection of features to be corrected, timing of correction, choosing a corrective technique and source of error correction. Waniek and Shockey (2013, page 89) claim that the degree of

these dimensions “are likely to vary depending on whether CF is provided during accuracy-based activities ... which is like to contribute to the growth of explicit knowledge ... or fluency oriented ones in which case ... may have a somewhat more direct impact on the development of implicit knowledge.” Therefore, the corrective feedback (CF) and even self-correction will be applied according to the goal of the activity because it can act as a bias when the purpose is improve fluency and it will affect the performance of the students.

However, if the purpose is to improve accuracy and pronunciation is a need “... applying systematic correction results in the improvement of English pronunciation while its absence slows down phonetic progress” (Jelska-Cydzik cited in Waniek and Shockey, 2013, Page 90). In other words to achieve the development of pronunciation is necessary correct the errors systematically and should be focus not just in segmental features such as rhythm and intonation, but in phonetics and especially in minimal pairs and phonemes that are uneasy sounds to identify and pronounce. So the teacher must be ready to recognize and correct the pronunciation errors, especially the phonetics problems that lead to unintelligibility. “Whatever the scenario... we may be dealing with ... pronunciation errors. Thus the syllabus and techniques we implement must be tailored to the types of problems we discern among our students”(Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996, page 17)

Another problem regarding correction is that in EFL settings the input mostly takes the form of repetition drills led by the teacher whose own pronunciation differed from the native pronunciation. Even though in ESL settings where students are immerse in a target language environment, pronunciation generally is not taught in an explicit way and the students might not be aware of their pronunciation problems.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness can be considered as the detection and manipulation of sounds structure at three different levels: (a) syllables, (b) onsets and rimes, and (c) phonemes. Phonological awareness plays a major role in learning to read words, sentences or paragraphs in a particular language. Phonetic development is the gradual acquisition of the ability to articulate speech sounds (e.g., /p/, /b/, /t/, etc.) and structures (e.g., consonant clusters such as /fl/ and /skw/). It is often referred to as articulation development.

Phonemic awareness is often used instead the term phonological awareness. However, these terms have different meanings. Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness focused on recognizing and manipulating phonemes which are the smallest units of sound. Therefore, a successful acquisition of phonological representations needs accurate perception of phonemic. There are various tests that are useful in assessing the level of phonological awareness.

Phoneme deletion: Also referred to as phoneme elision and it is the ability to identify how a word would sound if one sound were omitted. To develop this test several words are presented in oral way, one at a time. The task is to delete a given sound in the word and give the remaining word.

Phoneme oddity: This task consists of a series of three or more words orally presented. The task is to identify the word with the sound that did not match the sound of the other words in the set.

Syllable deletion: To develop this task two-syllable words are presented orally, one at a time. The task is to delete a given syllable at the beginning or end of the word and give the remaining word.

Phoneme identification: In this task are orally presented several words by sets and the task is to recognize the same sound in different words into a set.

Phoneme blending: To do this test the participant has to listen to a sequence of separately spoken phonemes and combining the phonemes to form a word.

Phoneme segmentation: It is the ability to break words down into individual sounds. The task is saying each sound as it is signaled.

Phoneme addition: This task consists of making a new word by adding a phoneme to an existing word.

Phoneme substitution: To develop this task the participant substitutes one phoneme for another to make a new word.

Methodological Design

The methodology adopted for this research consists on a survey questionnaire which was designed using aspects of several survey instruments in similar studies focus to know about difficulties the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ sounds in the teaching-learning process.

This research is non-experimental, qualitative, and explanatory and it was held in a transversal or longitudinal way which means that involves a representative subset at one specific point in time, and for this purpose were observed the classes of the second year of the Saturday program during the second semester 2013 at UNAN-Managua in several opportunities. We used (a) a survey aimed to EFL students from second year of Saturday Program of the English Major, (b) an observation guide which was applied in three different teaching-learning moments and (c) two interviews; one of them aimed to the teacher in charge of this specific group and the another one aimed to the linguist Pedro Vásquez which was intended to find out the major difficulties to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/.

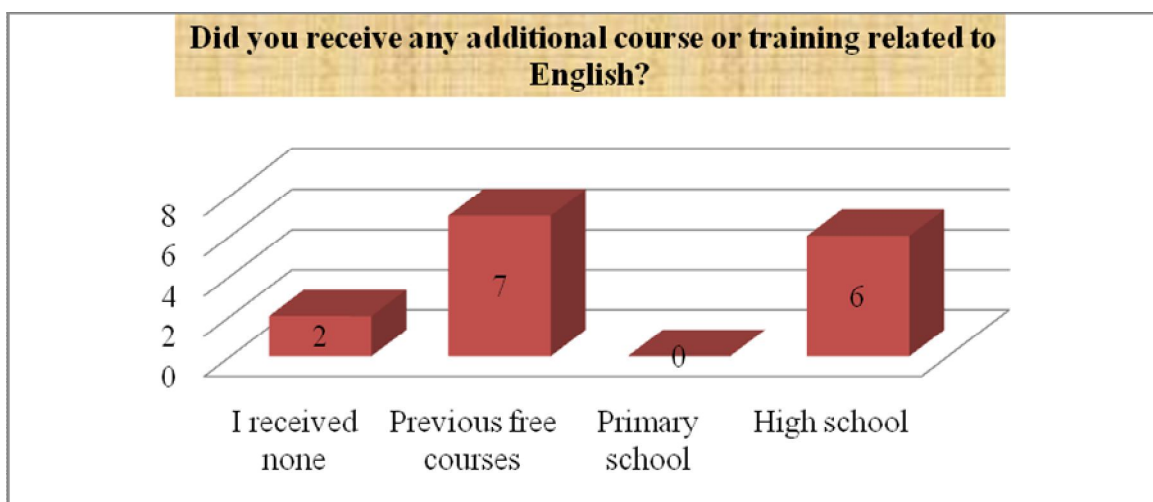
These instruments are intended to get academic information to assist to the English department management in making decisions to include changes in the curriculum to improve the quality in the teaching-learning process focus on pronunciation and phonetic that helps the students to achieve a good level of proficiency in oral skills.

Population and Sample

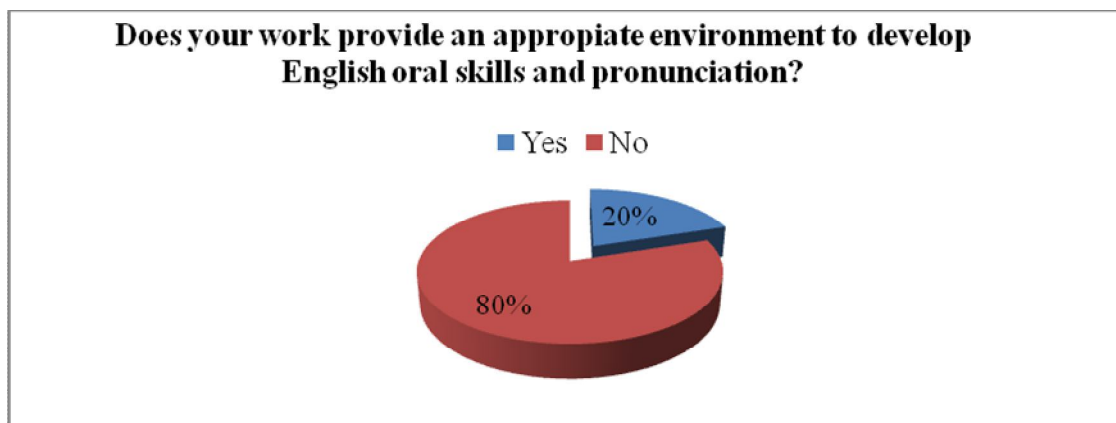
It is expected to have a population of 15 EFL students during the second semester - 2013, belonging to the Saturday Program of the English Major at UNAN-MANAGUA. The sampling is a type of probability sampling, which involves the sample being drawn from 100% of the selected population, because it is readily available and convenient.

Results and Discussion

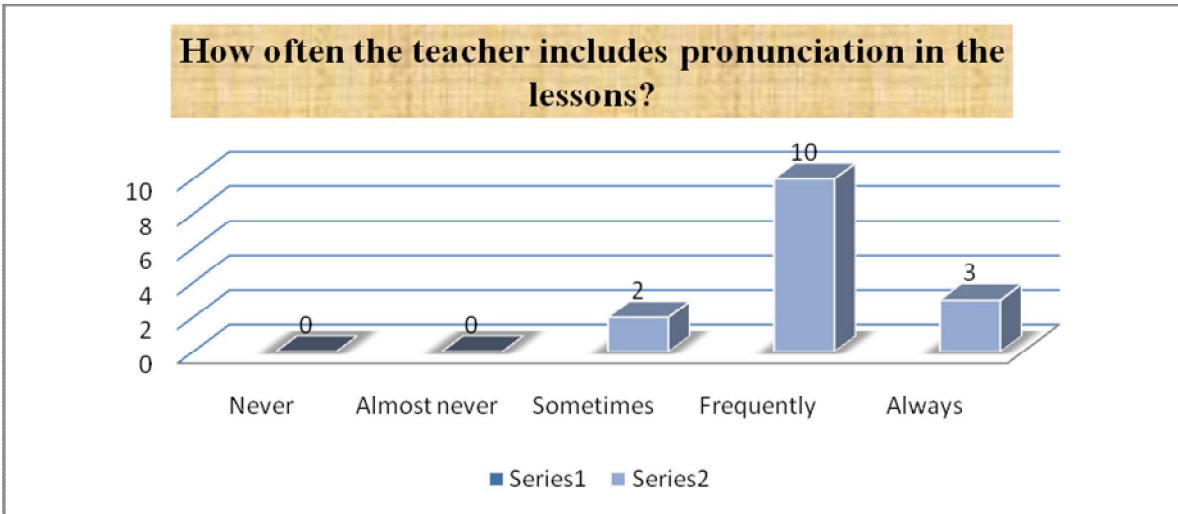
It is very important for the development of this research to delimitate the target population. The sample in this research is the same as the universe since it is a very small group of 15 students. These 15 students belong to the Saturday program of the English major at UNAN-Managua. The majority of the students in this group are between the ages of 18 to 30 years old and they are in their majority working people with an intermediate level of proficiency. The group reported that the majority had previous English instruction through high school and free English courses.



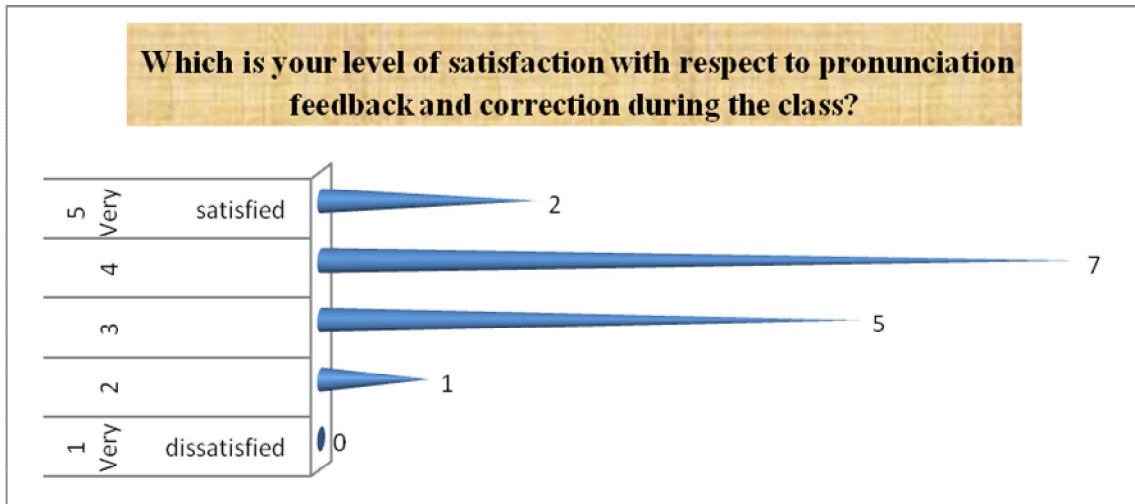
One of the most important details in this first stage of this research is the fact that the work places for an 80% of these EFL learners do not provide an appropriate environment to develop English pronunciation and speaking skill in general as it shows the graphic below.



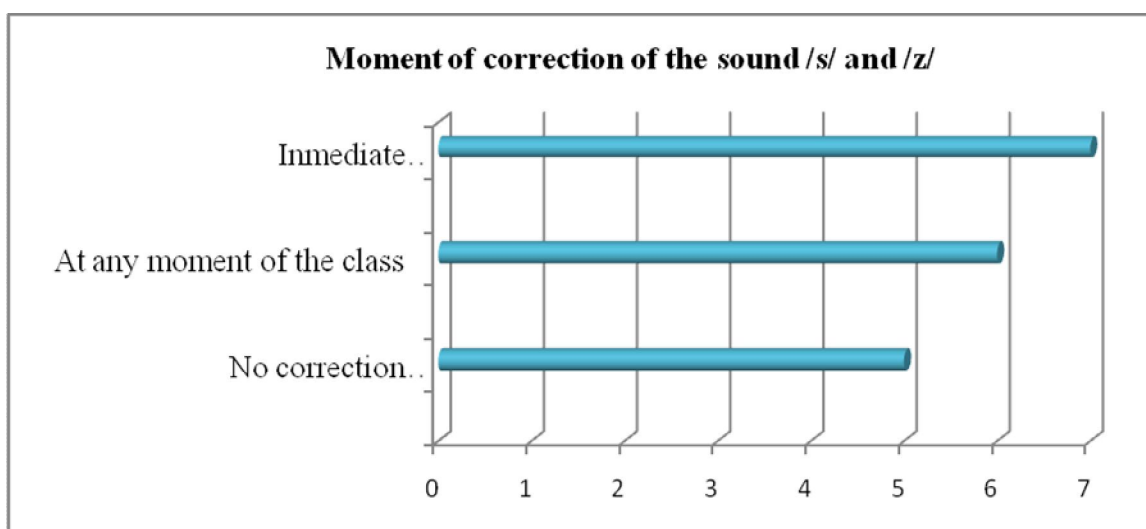
As it was mentioned before the exposure to the target language is a necessity to improve pronunciation and to allow the learners internalize the target language. Even though Ellis claim that exposure to the target language is not sufficient to guarantee the learning and improvement of pronunciation in the reality of the Saturday program the exposure out of the university became one important factor to success in the oral skills because the lack of practicing these skills lead to an stagnation of the learning process. It is logical than a learner which his/her only contact with English is through classes once a week and by his/her own has little opportunities to improve pronunciation. During the interview with the teacher of this specific group of students; she expressed the necessity of creating new spaces or opportunities to practice oral skills and pronunciation such as (a) conversation clubs, (b) talents shows in English and (c) role plays or drama plays additionally to the current classes. However, a 67% of the group perceive the teacher frequently include pronunciation (segmental and suprasegmental features) during the lessons. Besides a 47% consider the teacher has an excellent preparation to teach pronunciation and the 33% thinks it is very good.



The 73% of the students states that they are satisfied with the level of pronunciation that they have acquired through the EFL program at UNAN. It is reflected in the below graphic that show a 47% of students, representing the majority, are satisfied with the feedback and correction provided regarding pronunciation. A 13% expressed that they are very satisfied about this aspect, and just the 7% of the students feel somewhat dissatisfied.

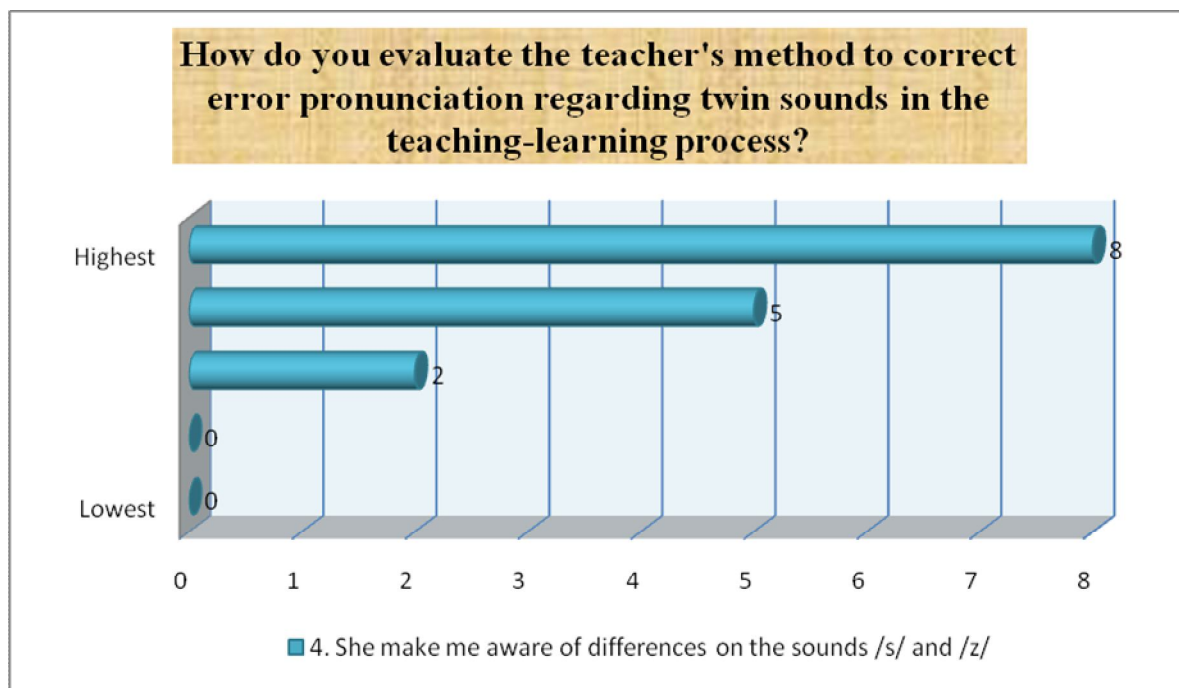


According to the teacher a problem about this should be faced, and it is the fact that many of the pronunciation errors mainly about phonetics, minimal pairs and phonemes are unknown and remain unrecognized by the students so they can provide a fake result about it. It was explained early in the theoretical framework that due to equivalence classification, the students might not even perceive the sounds and they convert the new sound in the closest equivalence in their native language. Consequently, it can be very difficult to them to evaluate appropriately the quality of the feedback and correction received. During the class observation it was found out that teacher tend to not emphasize the errors regarding phonetics immediately and it can cause that students do not internalize the correction or rule nor use it as monitor.

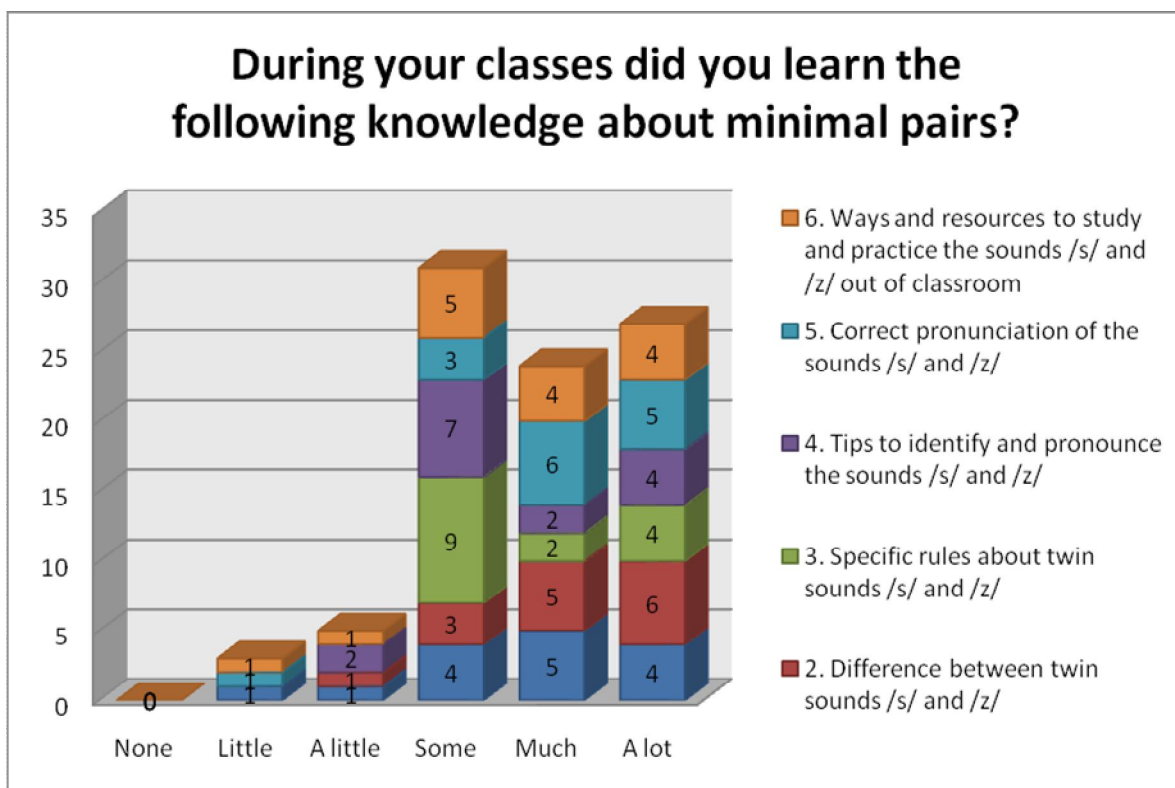


The graphic above shows how the students evaluate the teacher correction of the pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/ in regards to the moment that correction is applied. Contrasting with the class observation applied to this group where was observed that a great part of phonetic errors, including the twin sounds /s/ and /z/ errors are not corrected immediately. The teacher use to correct the errors sometimes through repetition, and seldom through an explicit explanation about these phonemes. The teacher makes pronunciation corrections implicitly, and the majority of times she does it through building a new sentence using the correct sound or restating what the student wrongly pronounce. She states she try to avoid the shyness and inhibition of the learners' speech. During the observations applied it was not possible to catch an occasion when the teacher explain how

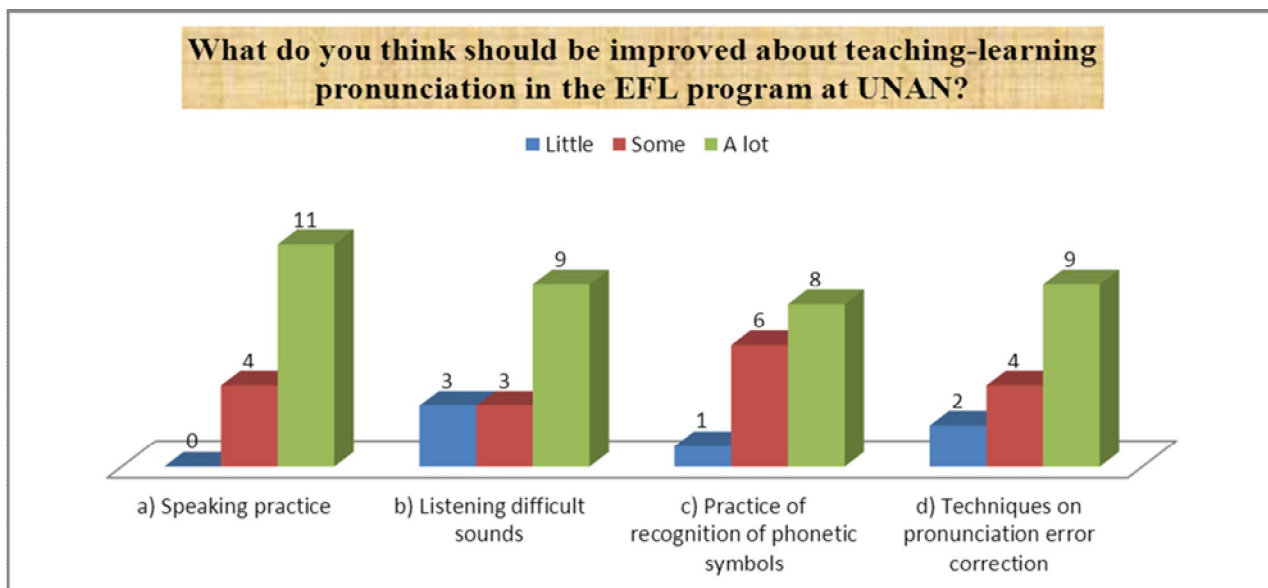
to apply any rules about phonemes or minimal pairs nor the specific twin sounds /s/ and /z/. However, the 53% of the group think the teacher make them aware of the differences of the sounds /s/ and /z/ as shows the graphic below.



The dissatisfied students said the aspects that they think are wrong about pronunciation at UNAN is that the Saturday EFL program include only one semester of pronunciation when it should be an integral part of the entire English program. Another thing is the lack of written resources or document about phonetics available to develop pronunciation, and they even expressed than sometimes the available documents are not studied in a deep way.



The students were questioned about if they have been provided with some basic knowledge about the phonemes /s/ and /z/ and they answer as follow: the 40% of the students said that they have learned a lot about the difference between the phonemes /s/ and /z/. A 60% stated that they have learned just some specific rules about these sounds, but they do not know much rules about them. A 47% said they have been provided with just some tips about how to identify and pronounce these sounds, but a 13% considers that they know just little tips about these. The 40% thinks they have learned much about the correct pronunciation of the twin sounds /s/ and /z/. Finally, the 33% of students answered that they manage some ways and resources to study and practice the sounds /s/ and /z/, but a 14% states they know little or a little about it.



The students were questioned about what they consider should be improved about the pronunciation teaching-learning process and the main concern was speaking practice with a 73%. It was followed by the 60% of the students thinking that the aspects that should be improved are the techniques of pronunciation error correction and listening of difficult sounds. Last but not less a 53% is concerned about the practice on recognition of phonetics symbols. It is supported by the theory that claims that phonetic are the aspects of speaking skill neglected by teachers and students. The graphic above shows how the students keep giving the main role to the speaking practice, but giving the lowest place to the practice and recognition of phonetics. Despite it should be recognized the importance of the oral practice the truth is that without the consciousness about phonetics and a good modeling from the teachers; it is difficult to overcome the errors and become a proficient speaker with a high level of intelligibility. The teachers have the duty of making the students aware of the importance of the phonetic knowledge; however, according to Dalton even teachers often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics.

The most important finding during this research is the perception that the students have about the teaching learning of the phonemes /s/ and /z/. The results are shown in the graphic in the page 27. The 47% of students think that the rules to recognize and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/ are very good; only a 27% think they are excellent, but the 7% think

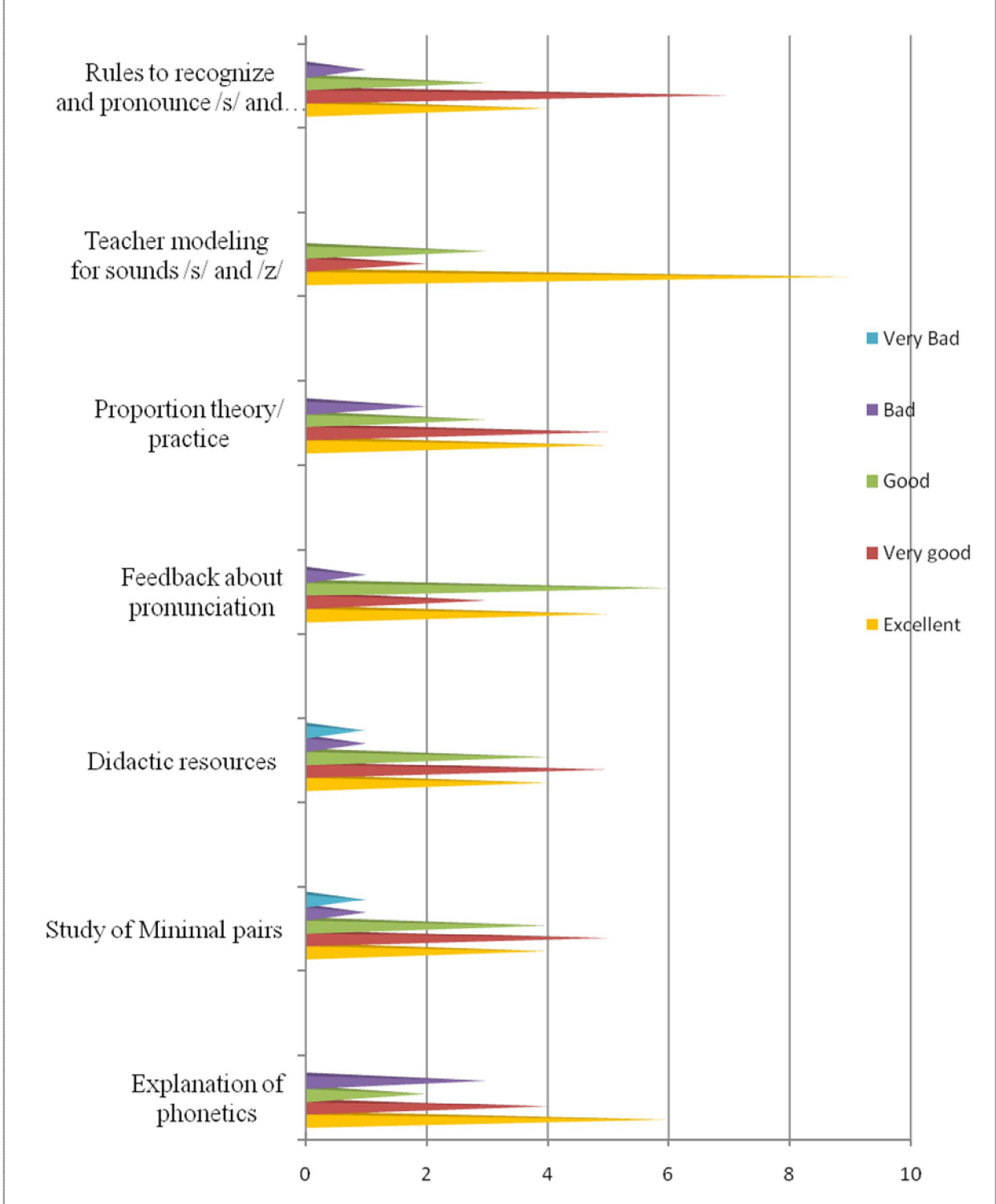
the rules provided are bad or not enough to improve pronunciation of these sounds. About the quality of the teacher as a model to pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/ the 67% of the students think that the teacher is an excellent model, but a 20% considered she is just good. A 66% of the students think that there is a balance between theory and practice of these phonemes.

Regarding the feedback they receive about pronunciation the 40% feels it is good, and a 33% feels it is excellent. The 33% thinks the use of didactic resources is very good while one 27% consider it is excellent and another 27% just good. Consistently, the same percentages were found out when the students were questioned about the study of minimal pairs in the classroom. Finally, the students were questioned about explanation of phonetics during their classes and the 40% expressed that they receive excellent explanations regarding phonetics, but a 20% think they are bad.

At this point there is a contrast between the results obtained through the survey and the results of the class observations. Also during the interview with the teacher we found out that her evaluation of the pronunciation performance of the students is contrastive with the student's perception. It can be due to a low level of phonological awareness between the students in this group.

Besides, it should be considered the size of this group because it is pretty small. It should be evaluated if the results obtained from this small group is representative at the level of the whole English major, and if the results obtained from this group are according to the actual level of proficiency regarding pronunciation between the EFL students at UNAN.

Students' evaluation about didactic aspects in the teaching-learning of sounds /s/ and /z/



Conclusions

Although this work has revealed several interesting aspects about the EFL teaching-learning of phonemes to develop pronunciation at UNAN-Managua, it has several limitations. Firstly, the universe and sample are too small and can be not representative to the level of the whole institution or English program. Also it should be considered that the time devoted to the observations are not enough to emit an accurate judgment. However, we found out that the majority of students perceive as excellent or very good the knowledge provided about phonetics and pronunciation and they have the same perception about the work of the teacher. The dissatisfaction of the students is about the time devoted to teach pronunciation and the didactic materials available to develop this skill.

During the observations was found out that the majority of the students are not aware of great part of their pronunciation errors, mainly the phonetic errors. More important is the fact that at this level they are not able to identify the phonetic errors and it cannot function as monitor to the improvement of pronunciation and speaking skill in general. The teacher use a communicative approach during her lessons and she avoid to give explicit instruction about phonetic. In the same way the pronunciation errors are not corrected immediately since the teacher considers it is a bias for fluency and by her experience the students feel inhibited when the teacher interrupt their speech to correct the pronunciation errors. She stated that she prefers using the mispronounce word later on to the students acquire the correct pronunciation. But there is a problem with this point of view and it is that if the students are not aware of the errors they probably will keep mispronouncing the same words.

The level of satisfaction of the students regarding the pronunciation program at the English Major at UNAN is very high. In the same way the students have an excellent opinion about the instruction received and the work that the teacher do. The students' perception is that they have a good level of proficiency and few problems about phonetic. Besides, they consider that the knowledge received about phonetic, minimal pairs and phonemes are enough to develop their pronunciation skills; however this contrast with the

theory that claims that EFL learners have major difficulties to pronounce minimal pairs and phonemes due to the interference of their mother tongue and especially for the phonetic differences between languages.

Recommendations

- The teacher should devote more time to pronunciation exercises about phonetic.
- These exercises must be the kind of exercise that helps the students to reach the phonemes discrimination and become in a high level of phonemic awareness such as phoneme deletion, phoneme oddity, syllable deletion, phoneme identification, phoneme blending, etc.
- We recommend the use of the Pedro Vasquez's diagram which can be very useful to facilitate the pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/. This diagram is very useful to create the phonemic awareness specifically for the sounds /s/ and /z/.
- We recommend the following websites specially devoted to the study of phonetic and minimal pairs:
 - <http://www.ompersonal.com.ar/omphonetics/consonants/practice3.htm>
 - <http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/english/frameset.html>
 - <http://www.agendaweb.org/phonetic.html>
 - <http://www.tinyteflteacher.co.uk/teacher/pronunciation/minimalpairs.html>
 - <http://streaming.ohio.edu/cas/lingCALL/consonant.htm>
- We recommend that the teacher put diverse charts and diagrams (including the Vázquez diagram) in a visible place in order to the students can internalize this valuable information about phonetic.
- Also it is recommendable that this research be extended to the level of the whole English department to obtain more accurate results about the subject.
- A final suggestion is to increase the listening of twin sounds in order to the students learn to distinguish between the two sounds.
- The speaking practice should be supported with listening practice because they are skills that cannot be separated, and the most important to reach a good level of intelligibility the learner should be capable to speak, but also to understand what he/she hears.

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ANNEXES

Variables and Indicators

Objective	Variables	Instruments
Identify the difficulties of EFL students to recognize the sounds /s/ and /z/.	Methods used to develop the sounds /s/ and /z/ in pronunciation skill.	Observation Guide Teacher's Interview
Recognize strategies of teaching-learning the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ sound.	Effectiveness of the teaching-learning strategies the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ sounds. Are being applied to accomplish this specific function.	Observation Guide Teacher's Interview Student's survey
Recommend some tips to help to EFL students to improve the pronunciation the /s/ and /z/ sounds.	Bring some elemental tips to help to EFL students to improve the pronunciation the /s/ and /z/ sounds.	Observation Guide Teacher's Interview Student's survey
To know strategies applied by the teacher to correct Phonetic errors.	Strategies used by the teacher to correct phonetic errors.	Observation Guide Student's survey



**Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua
UNAN-MANAGUA**

Faculty of Education and Languages

**Survey Questionnaire for Tracer Study of English Language
Teaching EFL Students.**

EFL Student Survey

Dear Student this survey is intended to carry out a study on “Difficulties to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/ as EFL students at UNAN on the second semester of 2013” with the intention of contributing to the improvement of knowledge on the subject. The information you provide will be crucial to achieving the goal of our study. We ask you truthfully answer all your answers. Thanks for your cooperation

I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

CASE

Use a tick (✓) to indicate your response where appropriate

1.1 Gender

Female

Male

1.2. Age

18-25 26-30 30-35 35+

II. ACADEMIC ASPECTS

Use a tick (✓) to indicate your response where appropriate

2.1. ¿What was your level of English before starting the English major?

You started from cero

Beginner

Intermediate

Advanced

2.2 ¿Did you receive any additional course or training related to English?

- I received none
- Previous free courses
- Primary school
- High school

2.3. During your studies, you:

- Worked all the time of your studies
- Worked several times
- Did not work

2.4. Does your work provide an appropriate environment to develop English oral skills and pronunciation?

- Yes No

III. LINGUISTICS ASPECTS

Firstly, some classes' sessions will be observed and then the pronunciation aspects will be compared with background knowledge, questions about pronunciation and phonetics will be made.

Use a tick (✓) to indicate your response where appropriate

3.1. Are you satisfied with the level of pronunciation acquired through the EFL program at UNAN?

- Yes No

3.2. Which is your level of satisfaction with respect to pronunciation feedback and correction during the class? Use a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest.

1 Very
dissatisfied

2

3

4

5 Very
satisfied

3.3. Could you describe why you are very/somewhat dissatisfied with the aspects in the question above? Answer this question only if the answer in the previous question is lower or equal to 3.

3.4. What do you think should be improved about teaching learning pronunciation in the EFL program at UNAN?

	Little	Some	A lot
Speaking practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening difficult sounds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Practice of recognition of phonetic symbols	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Techniques on pronunciation error correction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

IV. ACADEMIC STAFF

In this section, it is important to find out your opinion about the teacher's instructional delivery in the study programme.

4.1. With respect to the instruction received in the classroom, how do you evaluate the following aspects? Use a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest. Please, choose only answer for every aspect.

	Poor 1		Excellent 5		
	1	2	3	4	5
1. The teacher is prepared to teach English pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Explanation of phonetics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Minimal pairs or twin sounds are studied in the classroom	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Use of didactic resources to improve pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Feedback about pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The proportion between theory and practice are appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. The teacher is a good model to follow when practice the twin sounds /s/ versus /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. The teacher provide the necessary rules or tips to improve the recognition and pronunciation of /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4.2. How do you evaluate the teacher's method to correct pronunciation error regarding twin sounds in the teaching-learning process? Use a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest. Please, choose only answer for every aspect.

	Lowest 1				Highest 5
1. The teacher deals with me in a courteous manner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. She is open to suggestions and questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. She clears my doubts about the pronunciation of twin sounds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. She make me aware of differences on the sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. She promotes practice of minimal pairs inside and outside the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. She correct immediately the mispronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. She does not correct the mispronunciation of these sounds immediately but correct it at any moment of the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. She does not correct mispronunciation of /s/ and /z/ at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4.3. During your classes did you acquire the following knowledge about minimal pairs? Please, choose only answer for each of the following aspects:

	No way!					Definitely!
	0					5
1. Concept of phoneme, minimal pair or twin sounds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Difference between twin sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Specific rules about twin sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Some tips to identify and pronounce the sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Correct pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Ways and resources to study and practice the sounds /s/ and /z/ out of classroom	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4.4. How often the teacher includes pronunciation in the lessons?

Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4.5. How do you evaluate the method she uses to teach pronunciation?

Poor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Good	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fair	<input type="checkbox"/>	Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/>

4.6. What strategies she uses to teach minimal pairs, especially the sounds /s/ and /z/? Please explain.

Thank for your collaboration!

Observation Guide:

Part I: Observing Classroom Organization

1. Small group of 15 EFL Students
2. Classes began from 8:00 am to 10:40 am
3. EFL Students are attending the class for about two hours
4. The pronunciation level is high
5. The class is developed in a feedback context
6. EFL Students are interested to know about minimal pairs
7. Teaching Learning pronunciation is included in the EFL program
8. EFL Students know tips or rules to help them to identify and recognize twin sounds /s/ and /z/
9. EFL Students realize several role play activity to improve their pronunciation

Part II: Observing Instruction: Lessons

1. Teacher apply strategies to teach phonetics, minimal pairs, especially the sound /s/ and /z/
2. Teacher use methods to correct pronunciation error regarding twin sound in the teaching- learning process.
3. Teacher promotes activity to practice, and improve pronunciation.
4. Frequently teacher includes pronunciation, concept of phoneme, and differences between twin sounds in the lessons.
5. Teacher has enough preparation to teach pronunciation.
6. Teacher uses resources to explain pronunciation.

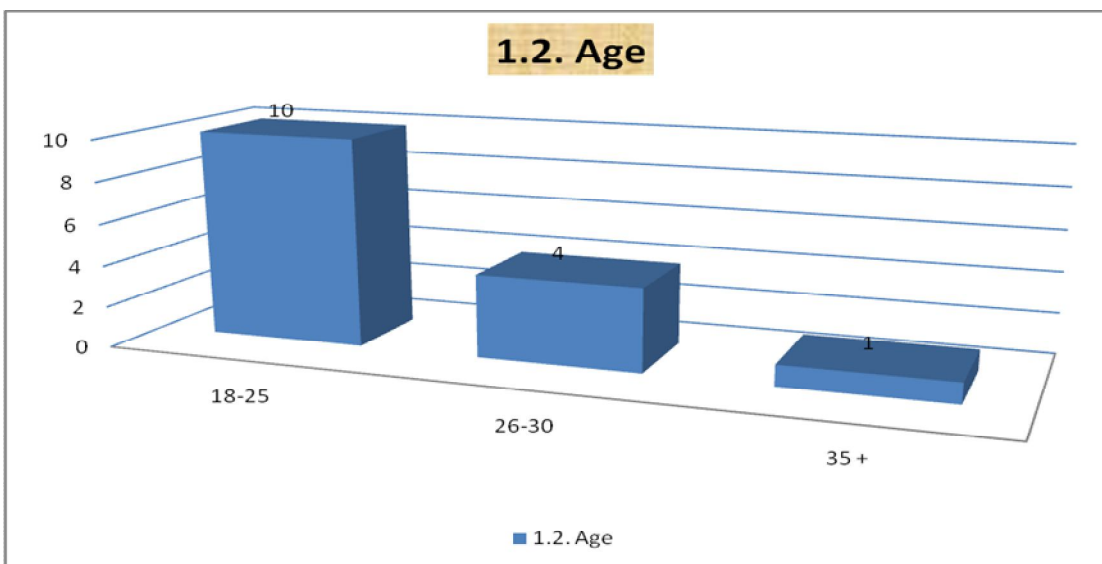
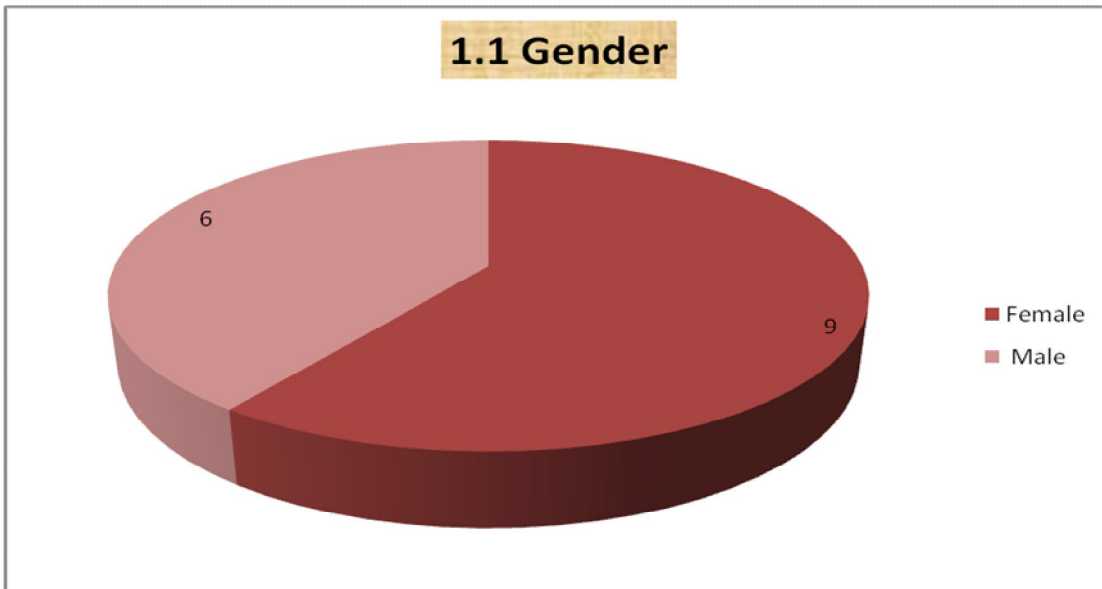
Part III: Observing Instruction: Effective Teaching Practices

1. The activities used to practice pronunciation are according to EFL English-Program.
2. EFL Students are satisfied with the teaching-learning process.
3. Pronunciation techniques are developed through the roll-plays, and listening practices.

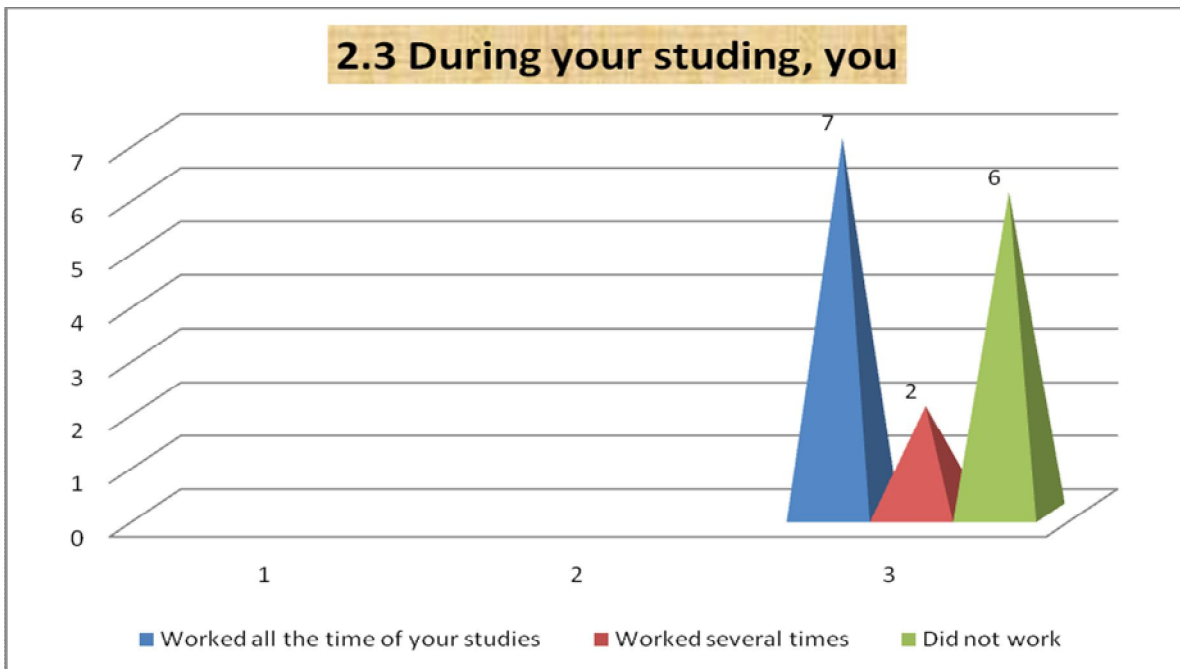
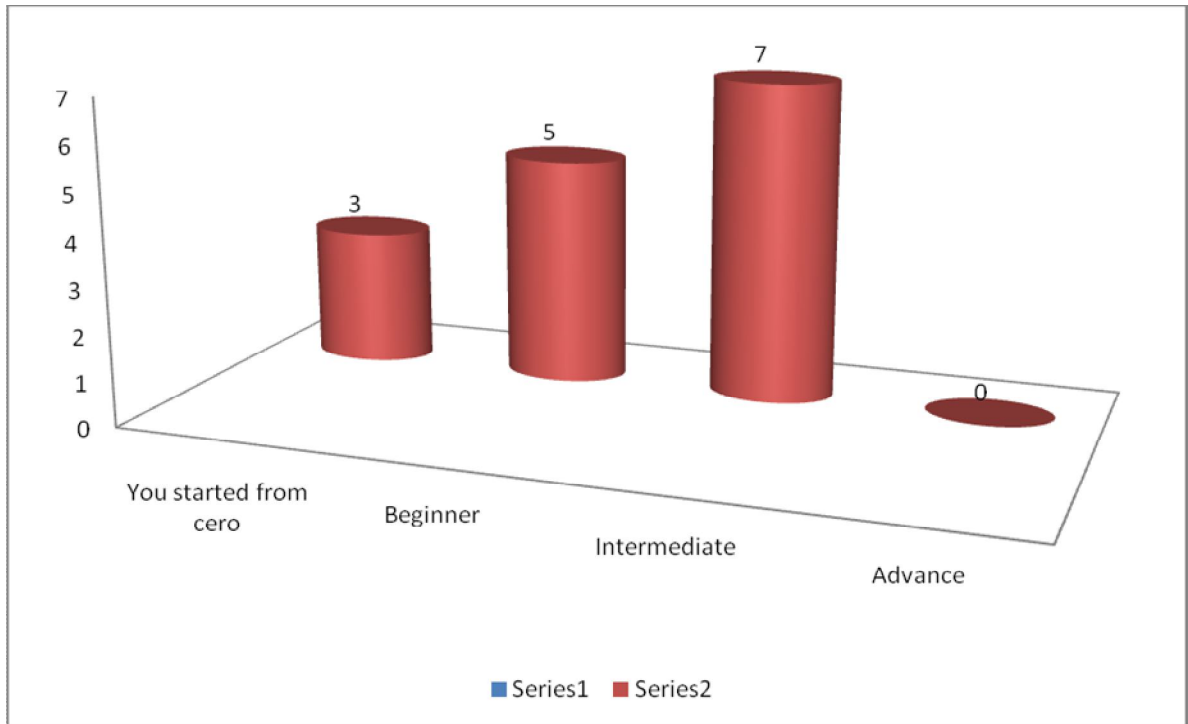
Teacher's Interview:

1. Could you describe the teaching techniques or strategies that are elemental to teach pronunciation?
2. How would you include pronunciation teaching in your classroom?
3. How do you identify the pronunciation weaknesses and needs of your students?
4. What techniques do you use to keep students actively involved during a lesson?
5. How do you incorporate pronunciation in your lessons?
6. How often do you teach about pronunciation techniques?
7. What effective are the activities focus on pronunciation?
8. How would you incorporate technology resources in your classroom?
9. What methods do you used to develop the sounds /s/ and /z/ in pronunciation skill?
10. Do you bring some elemental tips or rules to help EFL Students to indentify and recognize twin sound?
11. What is your opinion about the level of proficiency of your students on pronunciation, especially phonemes /s/ and /z/?

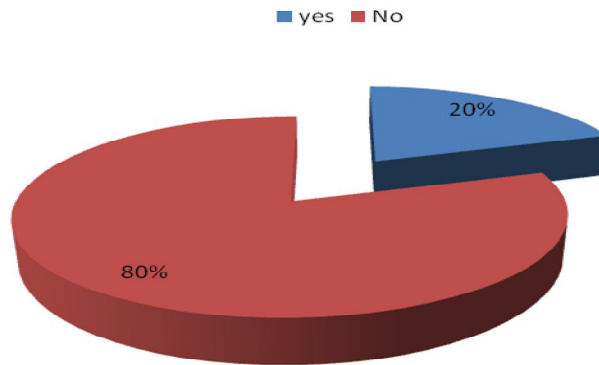
EFL Student Survey- Results I. PERSONAL INFORMATION



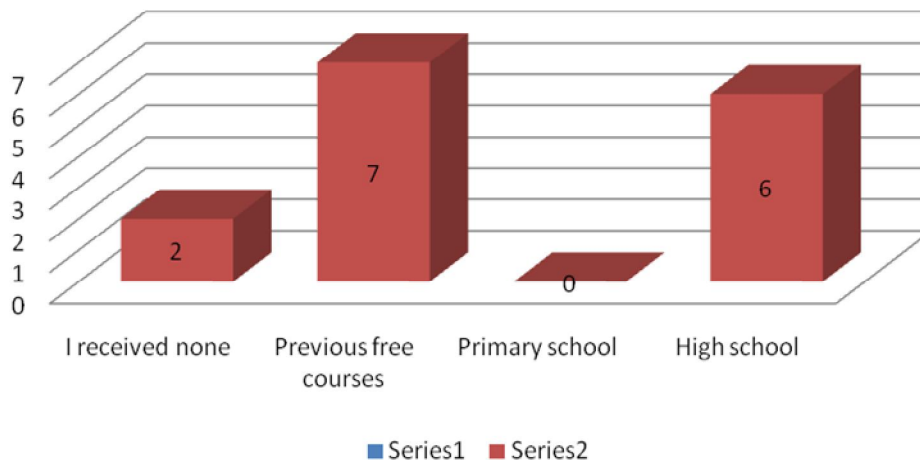
II. ACADEMIC ASPECTS



2.4 Does your work provide an appropriate environment to develop English oral skills and pronunciation

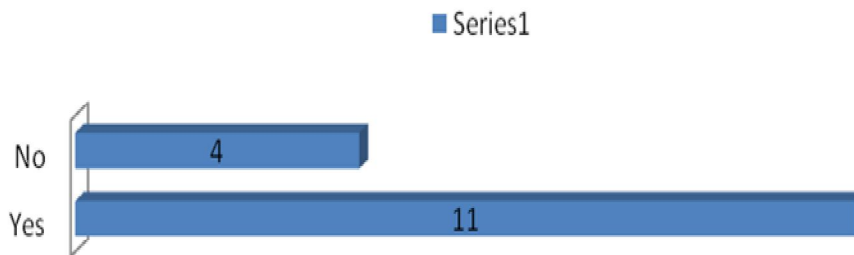


2.2 Did you receive any additional course or training related to English?

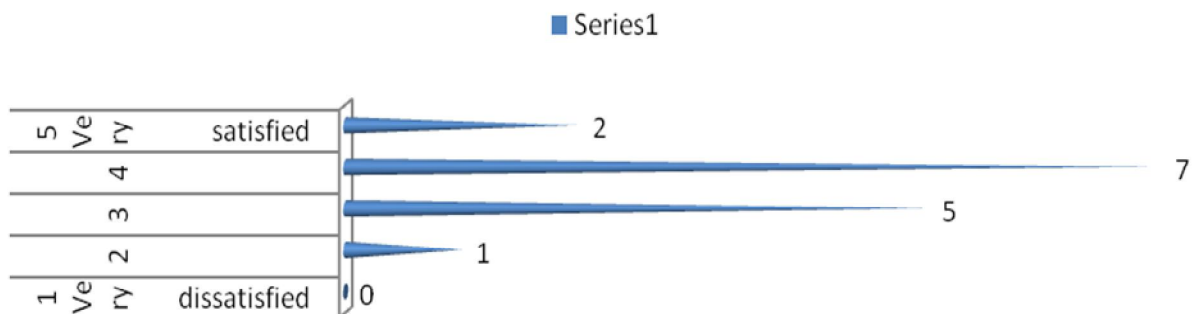


III. LINGUISTICS ASPECTS

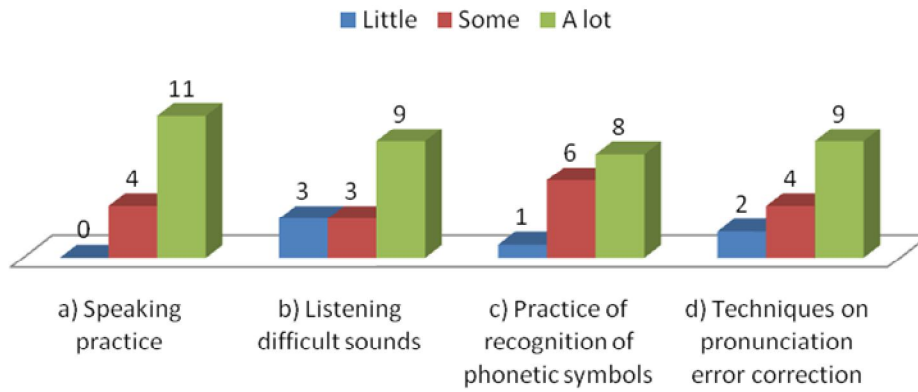
3.1 Are yo satisfied with the level of pronunciation acquired through the EFL program at UNAN?



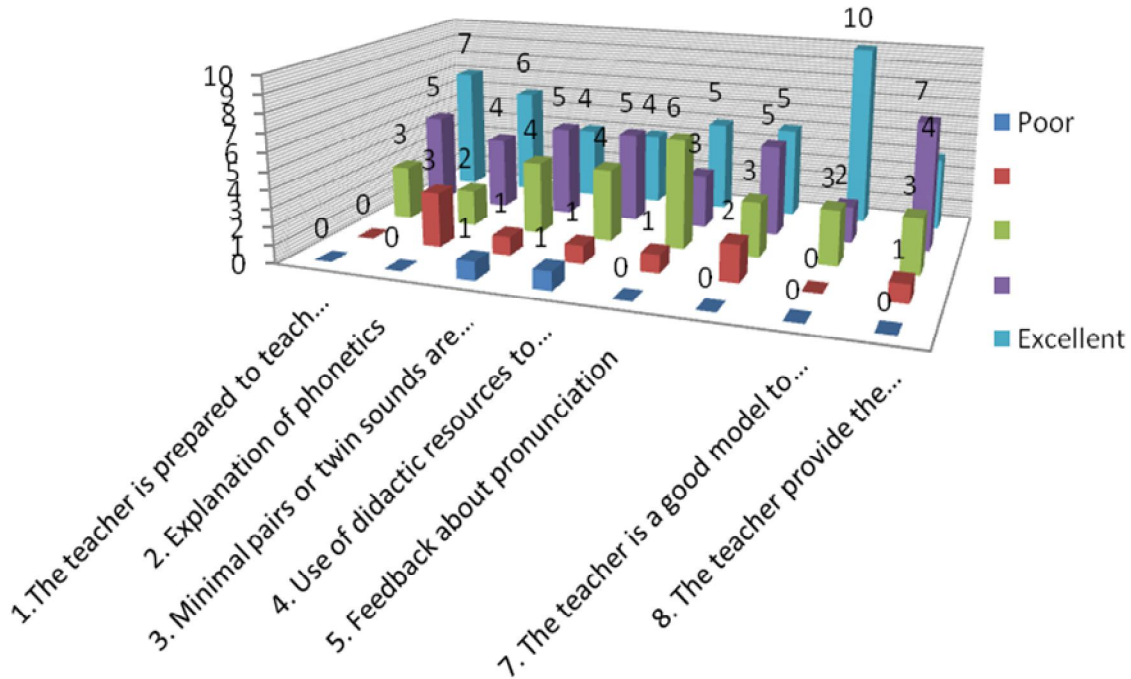
3.2 Which is your level of satisfaction with respect to pronunciation feedback and correction during the class? Use a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest score and 5 is the highest.



What do you think should be improved about teaching-learning pronunciation in the EFL program at UNAN?

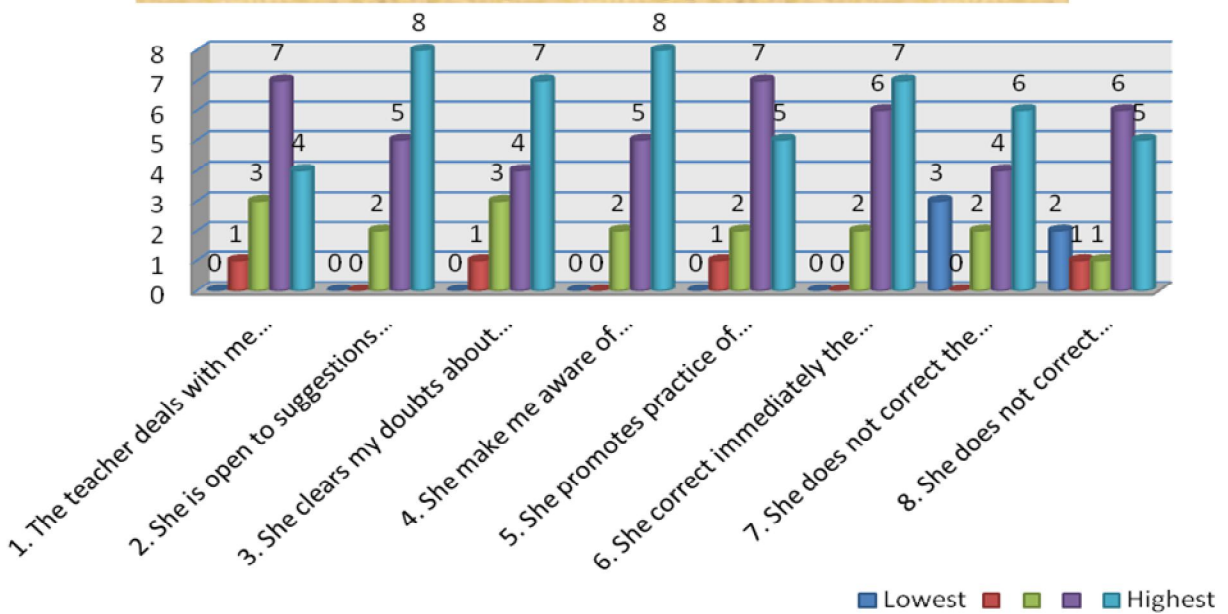


IV. ACADEMIC STAFF

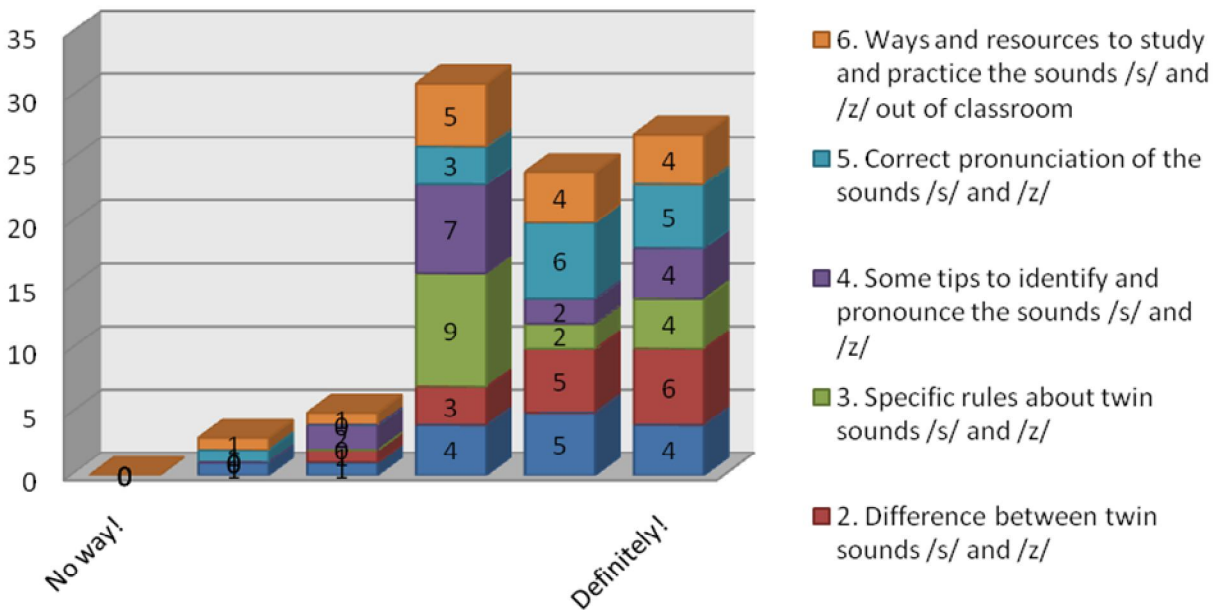


Whit respect to the instruction received in classroom, how do you evaluate the following aspects?

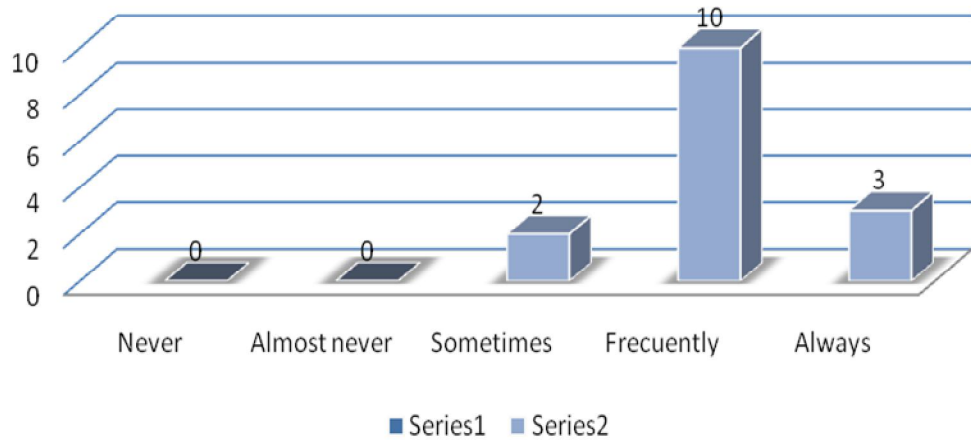
How do you evaluate the teacher's method to correct error pronunciation regarding twin sounds in the teaching-learning process?



During your classes did you acquire the following knowledge about minimal pairs?



How often the teacher includes pronunciation in the lessons?



How do you evaluate the method she uses to teach pronunciation?

