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AGE AND EXPERIENCE AS FACTORS IN PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH VOWELS

Abstract. The foreign accent (FA) phenomenon is one of the most common issues in second language acquisition (SLA). The factors causing its presence are various: as one of the most frequently mentioned are the differences in phonological systems of the mother tongue (L1) and foreign language (L2). In oral communication, phonological rules from L1 are usually copied to L2, which is often the cause of an unnatural accent in foreign language speakers. This is known as *transfer/interference*, and one of the reasons for its presence in literature is the inability of a speaker to properly *perceive vowels* of a foreign language. Insufficiently or incorrectly perceived vowels cannot be produced properly, which can further disturb oral communication and thus cause an individual to speak with a foreign accent.

In order to avoid the existence of a foreign accent, it is necessary that an L2 mastering begins as early as possible. The critical period is between 6-12 years of age. Early L2 learners are believed to acquire, produce and recognize the elements of an L2 phonological system with greater ease. However, some studies have shown that the constant exposure to foreign language and the length of learning positively affects the speaker's competence. Our research aims to verify these claims. Through an analysis of the results of two different age groups of adults in the field of perception of English vowels, we tried to provide an answer to the question of the extent to which the years of learning/time of exposure to a foreign language contribute to success in its acquisition.

Keywords: vowels, perception, age, experience, foreign language, transfer

INTRODUCTION

Foreign accent (FA) in the process of second language acquisition (SLA) has always represented an insufficiently investigated field in linguistic and phonological research. From the earliest studies on SLA, many researchers tried to provide answers to the question of which factors induce its occurrence. A substantial body of research is based on the idea of *transfer* and *interference*, that is, positive and negative influence of the phonetic/phonological rules of L1 to

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L2. Trubetzkoy (1939) concluded that L2 sounds were viewed through a phonological filter or a *grid* of the mother tongue. Flege (1988) mentions inadequate phonetic input, insufficient motivation, affective factors, or inadequate habits in the early stages of the SLA (Flege, 1995) as some of the primary reasons for the FA presence. Yet, one of the most frequently discussed factors in SLA literature is the *age* at which SLA begins. This phenomenon represents a central subject of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). The basic assumption on which this theory rests is that future L2 speakers are most capable of effectively acquiring L2 accent in this, so-called, *critical period* after which neurological changes typical of human maturation and aging occur. Such changes cause the reduction or loss of certain capacities in children to pronounce L1 (Flege, 1997), and thus influence the process of storing L2-related information in long-term memory. The reach of neurological maturity is followed by a decrease in neural plasticity (Penfield 1965, Lenneberg, 1967) and the ability of L2 speakers to add or modify the sensorimotor programs in the articulation of L2 sounds (Flege1992a). On reaching this period, new language forms cannot be perfected, since the so-called key period for the L2 acquiring is over (Lenneberg 1967, Scovel 1988, Patkowski 1990). This period, in relation to other linguistic skills, most often reflects on phonological accent in L2, since it is the only *physical part* in a language that requires neuro-muscular programming (Scovel, 1988). In other words, after the completion of this period, speakers of L2 hardly or almost never reach the level of L2 pronunciation of native speakers.

Although many researchers agree with thesis that a speaker of L2 is more predisposed to better pronunciation the sooner he begins to learn it (Asher & Garcia 1969, Suter 1976, Oyama 1979, Purcell & Suter 1980), a clear consensus on the precise beginning and completion of the key period does not exist. Lenneberg (1967), one of the founders of the CPH, believes that the SLA ability begins at the age of 2, and ends around puberty. Patkowski (1990), based on his findings, concludes that the presence of a foreign accent is much more detectable if SLA starts after the age of 15. Yet, one of the most detailed explanations is given by Long (1990). He states that the foreign accent in L2 (1) will not be present if SLA begins before the age of 6; that it will be (2) partially present if acquiring starts in the period between the age of 6 and 12, while (3) the children who start with SLA after the age 12 will speak with noticeable foreign accent.

Several studies speak in favor of this thesis. Asher & Garcia (1969), conducted a survey on a sample of 71 Cuban immigrants. The results in their study showed that those who had moved to

the United States earlier (around the age of 6 or earlier) spoke English with a smaller presence of a foreign accent. Oyama (1976) carried out a similar study on a sample of 60 Italian immigrants who had been in the United States between 5 and 18 years of age. Only the accent of those who started learning L2 before the age of 10 was positively evaluated by control speakers.

Recently, several studies have had similar results (Flege, Bohn & Yang, 1997; Flege, Yeni-Komshian & Liu 1999; Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001).

However, evidence that the presence of a foreign accent does not depend entirely on the AOL is presented in further research. Neufeld (1979) conducted his study on a sample of adult speakers, asking them to imitate an unknown language, previously exposing them to listening to it for a long period. The experiment showed that the participants managed to pronounce the sentences they heard without the presence of a foreign accent. Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle (1979) in their experiment examined two different age groups of native speakers of English in the natural acquisition of the Dutch language, for a period of one year. At the beginning of the experiment, an adult group of respondents showed more success in spontaneous pronunciation and imitation of Dutch sounds than children. At the end of the survey, the results among the groups were almost the same.

VOWELS AND EXPERIENCE IN L2

Based on the aforementioned studies on the beginning of L2 acquisition, it can be concluded that there is a general consensus on the claim that so-called *early learners* more easily acquire near-native or native pronunciation. However, this cannot be said about *experience in use* and *time of exposure* to a foreign language. Namely, numerous studies have shown that the factor of experience, although present and evident in some cases, does not affect the improvement of L2 pronunciation, or is negligible (Fathman, 1975; Asher & Garcia, 1969; Flege & Davidian, 1985; Moyer, 1999; McAllister, 2001). Flege (1998) notes that previous studies have often confused these two concepts, but that it turned out that the age at which L2 learning begins influences the success in L2 pronunciation *independently* of the amount of experience. The same author concludes that it is much more difficult for adults to achieve the level of perception (which sometimes leads to foreign accent and mistakes in production) on the global segmental level regardless of the greater experience in learning L2, than for children in the key period. Several

studies have confirmed this claim. Mack (1982) examined the duration of English vowels in adult French speakers of English as L2. The essence of the examination was based on recognizing the differences in duration of English vowels. The participants were presented with minimal word pairs that differed only in the segment of vowel duration, since it varies depending on vowels' phonological environment. Since such changes are not typical of the French language, the participants did not manage to recognize them. Munro (1993) conducted a similar study on adult native speakers of Arabic who learned English as L2. The results of the acoustic analysis of 10 English vowels in the production of Arabic speakers pointed to deviations in length in comparison to the values of the native English pronunciation, as well as the differences in spectral characteristics of the vowels. Although the participants themselves had considerable experience in learning English as L2, they did not manage to recognize either temporal or spectral characteristics of English vowels in relation to their phonological context. Flege, Munro and Skelton (1992) examined the pronunciation of adult, experienced Mandarin speakers of English as L2. The results they came up with showed that participants were unable to adequately articulate the length of English vowels. Flege, MacKay & Meador (1999) came up with the observation that pronunciation of the English vowels in their adult Italian native speakers of EFL is close to the Italian equivalents for the same vowels.

In terms of vowels, the number of empirical research of similar character in our country is rising. The phonological impact of mother tongue on L2 is in the focus of most of the conducted studies. The results generally point to the fact that there is interdependence between perception and production of phonological elements of L1 and L2 in participants. However, a clearly profiled consensus on the success in the L2 vowel acquisition, depending on the age of learning (AOL) and L2 exposure, does not exist. The experiment by T. Paunovic (Paunović 2002), conducted in two groups of participants from the greater metropolitan area around Niš, Serbia (divided according to the number of years of English language learning) was aimed at examining the influence of two factors on the *interference* in perception and production: the length of the speakers' learning and their age. The results of the tests of perception and production of the English monophthongs showed that the factor of length of learning is of great importance in the field of perception, which cannot be said for production. The author also concludes that, regardless of the age at which the study began, the best results in experiments were obtained from a group of English language students, which Paunović considers as the most important

factor in the L2 acquisition of phonological systems. Another study supporting the claim that institutional learning of a foreign language positively affects the competence of speakers L2 was carried out by Dancetovic (Dančetočić, 2017). The research was conducted with the aim of examining the differences in the degree of phonological competence of two relatively similar groups, in terms of quality and quantity of 10 English monophthongs. The production test was conducted in two peer groups of female sophomore students – one from the Department of English Language and Literature at Faculty of Philosophy, and the other from Medical Faculty in Kosovska Mitrovica. Both groups had the task of pronouncing lexemes within the same carrier sentence, where each of the lexemes contained target monophthongs. The mean number of years of learning English as a foreign language in both groups was identical - 12 years, and all participants began learning L2 in the same period. The results obtained indicated significant similarities in terms of quality of English vowels among all students - no group has succeeded in recognizing their spectral characteristics. However, the results also pointed to a certain precedence of the group from the Department of English Language and Literature. Namely, since they were more familiar with the phonetic/phonological system of the English language, as well as with the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of English vowels during the study program *Phonology* in the first year of studying, this group of students had more success in recognizing vowel quantity as a distinctive feature. Participants from the Faculty of Medicine, however, did not perceive this vowel feature as a relevant distinctive characteristic in pronunciation, which could be due to the lack of their exposure to the phonetic/phonological rules of the English language through appropriate study programs.

Traditionally, vowel quantity is perceived as a crucial distinctive feature in English language students. It often overshadows vowel quality, regardless of the phonological competence of students. Thus, on the production tests, respondents often show hypercorrective tendencies in terms of vowel duration, while vocal quality parameters indicate to clear deviations from standard values from literature or pronunciation of native speakers. Such tendency in teaching was shown in the research by Dancetovic (Dančetočić, 2018). The study was carried out in a total number of 30 participants, divided into two groups of 15 freshmen and 15 seniors. The aim of this study was to determine the level of progress in perception and production of English monophthongs between the two different age groups of students, as well as to define to what extent the period of two years of learning influenced the improvement of competence in the older

group of students. The results showed that performance in perception does not necessarily lead to success in production, and that the period of two years of teaching is insufficient to improve student competence in the field of English vowel qualities. They also pointed to the fact that students were more successful in identifying and producing those elements of the English vowel system that their mother tongue does not contain, which coincides with the Flege's Speech Learning Model (1995). However, as this model is based on the analysis of the elements at the segmental level, it remains insufficiently clear whether and to what extent the experience and the use of suprasegmental contrasts in the duration of vowels in their mother tongue affect the overall performance of participants in those segmental foreign language distinctions untypical of their mother tongue. Krebs-Lazendic & Best in their research (2013) tried to provide the answer to this question, as well as to the question of how years of learning influence the perception and production of L2 contrasts. The obtained results indicated the systematic influence of suprasegmental properties on the perception and production of vowel contrasts in L2. Early learners also scored significantly better results than late learners.

Despite all the aforementioned studies on the beginning of the AOL and experience in L2, it still remains insufficiently clear to what extent they affect the performance in the perception of English vowels. Our research will try to provide answers to this question.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two groups of participants from the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica. The first group - group A consisted of seven senior student-participants who started learning EFL in regular lectures in an identical period in elementary school, with an average number of 13.71 years of learning. The second group (Group B) included the same number of teacher-participants whose EFL learning began in the same period as in the group A, with average number of 13.14 years of learning (Table 1).

GENERAL INFORMATION (GROUP A)				
No.	Birthyear	Year of study enrollment	Hometown	Number of years of English language learning
1.	1995	2014	KosovskaMitrovica	12
2.	1991	2010	Prokuplje	16
3.	1995	2014	Leskovac	12
4.	1995	2014	Leskovac	14
5.	1995	2014	Pirot	14
6.	1995	2014	Priština	12
7.	1982	2015	KosovskaMitrovica	16
Mean value				13.71

(a)

GENERAL INFORMATION (GROUP B)					
No.	Birthyear	Year of study enrollment	Hometown	Number of years of English language learning	Number of years of English language learning
1.	1978	1995	Skoplje	12	15
2.	1971	1990	Čačak	12	22
3.	1978	/	Vranje	16	18
4.	1983	2002	Priština	12	8
5.	1985	2004	Novi Pazar	12	10
6.	1985	2003	KosovskaMitrovica	16	11
7.	1988	2007	Prokuplje	12	5
Mean value				13.14	12.71

(b)

Table 1. Average number of years of EFLof senior students (a) and teachers (b)

As shown in table 1, the level of EFL competence in both groups is quite high. The main difference between groups is the average of nearly 13 years spent in English language teaching in favor of Group B.

The perception test contained a corpus of 20 minimal pairs of words, all of which were in the CVC form. The words were selected according to their presence in everyday speech, the length of vowels in them, and their allophonic length (Table 2). For each pair of vowels, eight words were selected, i.e. four words per examined vowel. All the lexemes from the table 2 were uttered by native speaker Sacha Markovic and recorded in digital .wav format, after which they were reproduced to participants in adequate conditions. The native speaker read the orthography of the selected words, while the participants were only given a selection of corresponding IPA short and long vowel symbols in the worksheet (Figure 2).

For the purpose of participants' absolute focusing solely on listening, i.e. lexical perception, the order of words read by native speaker was different from the one in Table 2 (Figure 1).

[ʌ]-[ɑ:]		[ɒ]-[ɔ:]		[e]-[æ]		[ɪ]-[i:]		[ʊ]-[u:]	
<i>cut</i>	<i>cart</i>	<i>cops</i>	<i>corpse</i>	<i>blend</i>	<i>bland</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>deed</i>	<i>wood</i>	<i>wooded</i>
<i>some</i>	<i>psalm</i>	<i>stock</i>	<i>stork</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>batter</i>	<i>bit</i>	<i>beat</i>	<i>full</i>	<i>fool</i>
<i>chum</i>	<i>charm</i>	<i>tot</i>	<i>thought</i>	<i>ember</i>	<i>amber</i>	<i>chip</i>	<i>cheap</i>	<i>pull</i>	<i>pool</i>
<i>luck</i>	<i>lark</i>	<i>cod</i>	<i>cord</i>	<i>merry</i>	<i>marry</i>	<i>fit</i>	<i>feet</i>	<i>hood</i>	<i>who'd</i>

Table 2. Minimal word pairs grouped by *short-long* opposition

Reading list (across)

1. cart	13. stock	25. pool	37. thought
2. cops	14. chum	26. amber	38. wood
3. blend	15. beat	27. corpse	39. fit
4. wooed	16. better	28. tot	40. bland
5. stork	17. lark	29. batter	
6. psalm	18. some	30. cheap	
7. fool	19. ember	31. charm	
8. deed	20. hood	32. merry	
9. full	21. luck	33. cod	
10. bit	22. cut	34. who'd	
11. chip	23. marry	35. feet	
12. pull	24. did	36. cord	

Figure 1. The order of lexemes in production of the native speaker

The worksheet participants had to fill in contained the following instructions and symbols:

1. Listen to the following words and circle the vowel you hear. If a word contains more than one syllable, listen to the vowel in the first one.

1. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	11. /ɪ/ or /i:/	21. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	31. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/
2. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/	12. /u:/ or /ʊ/	22. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	32. /e/ or /æ/
3. /e/ or /æ/	13. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/	23. /e/ or /æ/	33. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/
4. /u:/ or /ʊ/	14. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	24. /ɪ/ or /i:/	34. /u:/ or /ʊ/
5. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/	15. /ɪ/ or /i:/	25. /u:/ or /ʊ/	35. /ɪ/ or /i:/
6. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	16. /e/ or /æ/	26. /e/ or /æ/	36. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/
7. /u:/ or /ʊ/	17. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	27. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/	37. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/
8. /ɪ/ or /i:/	18. /ʌ/ or /ɑ:/	28. /ɔ:/ or /ɒ/	38. /u:/ or /ʊ/
9. /u:/ or /ʊ/	19. /e/ or /æ/	29. /e/ or /æ/	39. /ɪ/ or /i:/
10. /ɪ/ or /i:/	20. /u:/ or /ʊ/	30. /ɪ/ or /i:/	40. /e/ or /æ/

After conducting the test, the results were statistically processed and will be presented in the next chapter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the obtained results showed high success in the acquisition of vowel oppositions. This fact points to a high level of phonological competence in both examined groups. As the threshold of successful acquisition of the vowels, we set the limit of 75%. In accordance with this value, we have concluded that most of the monophthongs from the test have been successfully acquired by both groups, that is, the distinctions within the vowel opposition adequately recognized. However, by further comparing the results between the groups, it was concluded that the performance of group A is inferior in terms of certain vowels in comparison to group B. Thus, Group A students do not cross the threshold of acquisition in vowels /i:/, /e/ and /a:/, whereas in the group of more experienced participants - group B - no vowels are below this limit. Percentage results of Group B are higher than Group A in 8/10 tested vowels, implying that experience as a factor in English vowel acquisition can be regarded as positive phenomenon in L2 speaker performance. Graphic representation of the percentage of all vowels is shown in graph 1.

Vowels	Acquisition percentage GROUP A	Acquisition percentage GROUP B
/ʌ/	89.5%	96.5%
/ɑ:/	71.5%	93%
/ɒ/	75%	96.5%
/ɔ:/	82%	96.5%
/e/	50%	79%
/æ/	89.5%	89%
/ɪ/	81%	86%
/i:/	27%	93%
/ʊ/	82%	78.5%
/u:/	82%	100%
AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF PERFORMANCE	72.95%	90.80%

Table 3. Percentage of acquired vowels - group A and group B

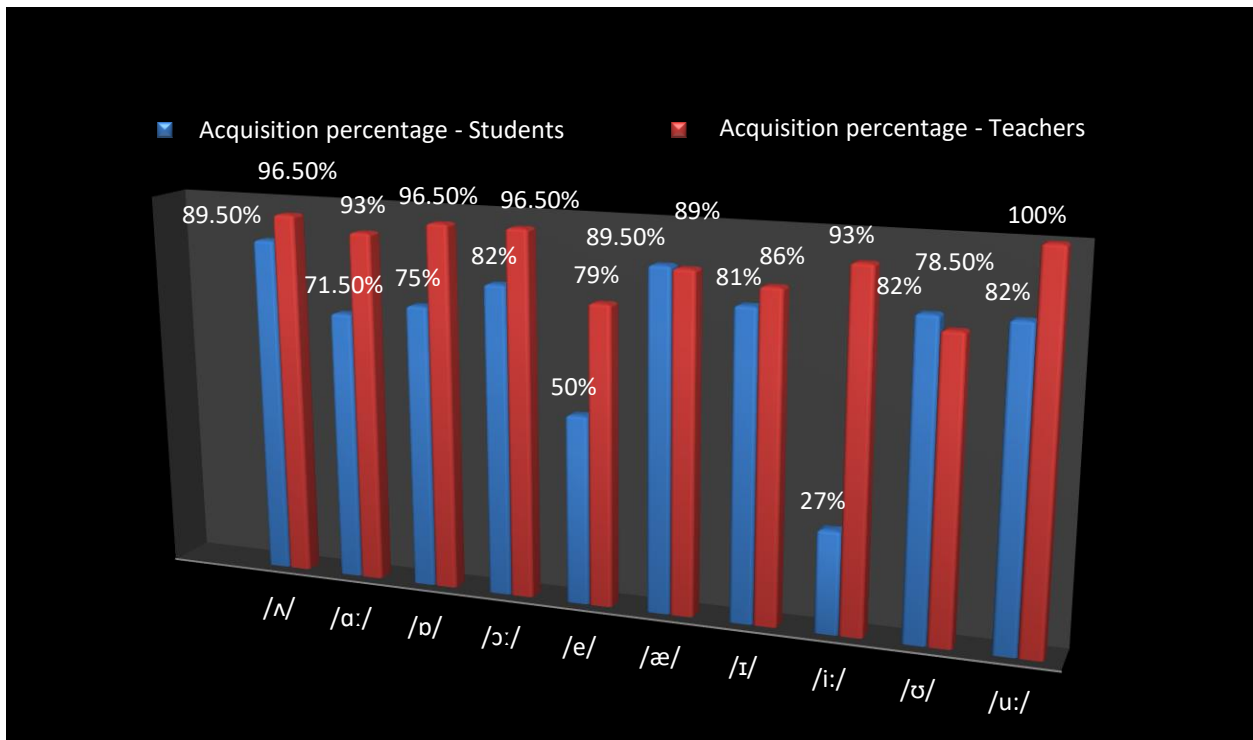


Chart 1. Average percentage of acquisition of all individual vowels

Grafikon 1. Prosečna procentualna usvojenost pojedinačnih samoglasnika grupe A i grupe B

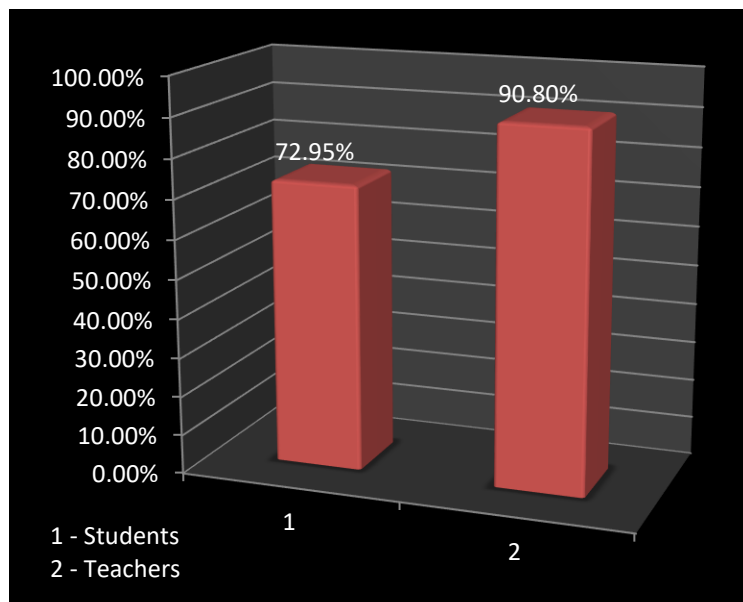


Chart 2. The overall performance of both groups in percents

Grafikon 2. Ukupna uspešnost obeju grupa izražena u procentima

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the results we obtained in the research unambiguously indicates the positive score of the group with a considerable experience in the EFL. Perceptive discriminatory abilities in identifying vowels within the oppositions are more evident in more experienced group subjects (Chart 2). The factor of experience in the use of EFL in our case has positively influenced the overall performance of a more experienced group in the perception of the English vowels. Our impression is that perceptual abilities improve in proportion to the experience in using L2. This claim coincides with Weiss's research (1992), which reveals that a greater experience in L2 improves perception more than production. Experience in use, and years of exposure to L2 improve speaker's perceptual abilities, which cannot be said for production (Flege, 1988). Several early research on the topic of *interlanguage* support this claim. (Nemser 1971, Selinker 1972, Selinker & Lamendella 1980, Corder 1981). According to these studies, SLA speakers often fail in reaching the level of language competencies equivalent to native speakers, regardless of their frequent tendency in trying. One of the most common reasons is the presence of so-called *restricting phases* in the acquisition of L2 linguistic norms. A permanent cessation of progress toward the L2 has been referred to as *fossilization* (Selinker, 1972). Fossilization encompasses all linguistic rules and skills of the target language and it is particularly evident in adult's production. However, the correlation of perception and production, regardless of numerous studies in phonological literature, still remains insufficiently explained, and motivation, methodological differences in perception and production tests, the nature of the techniques for assessing the results of the tests, the conditions under which research is conducted, and the inevitable social factor, are just some of the reasons for this state in literature.

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ГОДИНЕ И ИСКУСТВО КАО ФАКТОРИ У ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈИ ЕНГЛЕСКИХ САМОГЛАСНИКА

Апстракт. Феномен страног нагласка једна је од присутнијих појава у усвајању страног језика. Фактори који утичу на његово настајање су вишеструки, а као један од најчешће помињаних јесу разлике у фонолошким системима матерњег (Л1) и страног језика (Л2). Приликом усмене комуникације се фонолошка правила из Л1 преносе у Л2, што неретко проузрокује неприродан нагласак код говорника страног језика. Ова појава се карактерише као *трансфер/интерференција*, а као један од разлога њиховог присуства у литератури се наводи немогућност говорника да правилно перципира *вокале* страног језика. Недовољно или неправилно перципирани вокали не могу се правилно ни репродуковати, што даље може ометати или нарушити усмену комуникацију.

Да би се постојање страног нагласка избегло, потребно је да се страни језик почне савладавати што раније. Као кључни период наводи се доба од 6-12 година старости. Говорници који раније почну са усвајањем Л2 лакше препознају, усвајају и продукују елементе његовог фонолошког система. Ипак, у неким истраживањима се показало да стална изложеност страном језику и дужина учења позитивно утиче на компетенцију говорника. Наше истраживање управо има за циљ проверу ове тврдње. Кроз анализу учинка две групе одраслих говорника различитих година на пољу перцепције енглеских вокала, покушали смо дати одговор на питање у којој мери године учења/време изложености страном језику доприноси успешности у његовом усвајању.

Кључне речи: вокал, перцепција, године, искуство, страни језик, трансфер