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**MULTIMEDIALNY KURS WYMOWY ANGIELSKIEJ
“SAY IT RIGHT”,
2009, ATENA AND SUPERMEMO WORLD**

This *Multimedia course of English pronunciation* was published in 2009 by (i) *Oficyna Wydawnicza Atena* (<http://www.owatena.com.pl>) and (ii) *SuperMemo World* (<http://www.supermemo.pl/>) as a box containing a DVD disk with

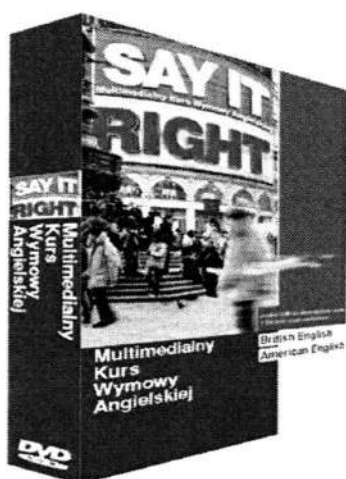


Figure 1. *Say it right* box

2.2GB content, and a book of 168 pages. Both *Atena* and *SuperMemo* have an excellent record for publishing foreign language courses, dictionaries and resources, as is easily confirmed by scanning their online presence. The authors of *Say it right* are: Krzysztof Sawala, Tomasz Szczegóła and Jarosław Weckwerth, all experienced EFL educators employed in the School of English Adam Mickiewicz University. Considering the above, it comes as no surprise that *Say it right* is immediately recognized as a very welcome addition to the stock of EFL multimedia materials available to the Polish learner, that it maintains a consistently high level of quality throughout (both in terms of content and form), and that it manages to target

with enviable precision the main issues and problems with pronunciation which Polish learners of EFL (henceforth *Polglish*) commonly experience. This being the first edition of the course, some editorial errors and infelicities are of course inevitable, on which I will duly report below. None of them, however, appear to affect my overall good opinion of the resource submitted for review.

This review is divided into two parts: descriptive and analytic/evaluative. I start with briefly introducing the contents of the package (concentrating on the DVD), to later pass over to some analytic remarks and general evaluation. Like with any such review, it should be remembered that only a rather

superficial treatment will be possible, due to space constraints. Many issues of phonetic and pedagogical interest will of necessity have to be left unexamined here, for example the vexed question of word-final obstruent (de)voicing in Polish speech, which deserves a more thorough treatment in a scholarly publication.



Figure 2. The introductory screen in *Say it right*

there are two substantial differences between the contents of the DVD and the book (ignoring the multimedia, of course): for some unexplained reason (1) the introductory section in the book is much richer than on the DVD; the latter is just half a page of text with two paragraphs about: (i) phonetic sources of communicative failure, and (ii) the recommended target user and course use logistics, as seen in Figure 2, and (2) in hard copy Polish translations only appear in the minimal-pair sections of each phoneme chapter, unlike on the DVD where they accompany every single recording.

In the book the reader is offered a two-page-long FAQ (“Zamiast wstępu” – “In place of introduction”) with the following sections: (i) What is correct pronunciation?, (ii) Why is it worth while correcting one’s pronunciation?, (iii) What are sources of wrong pronunciation, (iv) Can one learn good pronunciation by oneself?, (v) What to do in order to succeed?, (vi) What is our method of teaching pronunciation?, and (vii) Who is this course for? These question are quite crucial when it comes to teaching and learning foreign pronunciation, and I will return to them in the analytic part of this review.

Coming back to the DVD now, the half-page introduction is one of five tabs in the top menu of the course screen, as seen in Figure 2. The next tab is the British-American accent toggle. The middle tab opens the course proper, showing the screenful of all English phonemes, and starting a videoclip demonstrating the lip movements in each in turn (incidentally, this video cannot be stopped otherwise

Considering the nature of the subject matter – pronunciation – the main part of the package (see Figure 1.) is of course the DVD, which holds: (i) the recordings of words, phrases and sentences (with Polish translation), (ii) the snapshots, videoclips and animations of articulatory movements, (iii) the entire text of the course. In this situation the book appears to be a somewhat superfluous add-on, especially for many young learners, who are used to consulting only digital resources, both online and off. Interestingly,

than by selecting one phoneme and going into its section). This screen of the program is shown in Figure 3.

Once the learner has selected which sound s/he wants to work on, the screen with the chosen sound is opened, which looks like in Figure 4.

The bottom menu now offers 14 tabs, each containing one type of content or exercise. The first screen is always the introductory one, offering: (i) the animation and videoclip, and (ii) some general information about the practiced phoneme, as seen in Figure 4. The latter has a set structure: first some contrastive English-Polish discussion, then a phonographic section listing the most common ways the given phoneme is spelled in English. The



Figure 4. The tense /i:/ screen

program: phonetic symbols with keywords, words often confused due to similar spelling (e.g. *assess-access, adopt-adapt*), homophones, homographs, words with idiosyncratic pronouncing difficulties, mostly due to grapho-phonemic inconsistencies (*abroad, counterfeit, iron, queue*), "silent letters", prefixes and borrowings. This time there are no exercises or tasks; these are simple lists for the learner to play and listen to.



Figure 3. All English phonemes to select from

sequence of the remaining tabs in the given phoneme section is also normalized, passing from "listen and repeat" (words, proper names, phrases, sentences, minimal pairs) through binary choice listening tasks (minimal pairs of words, phrases and sentences), to "listen-record-compare" exercises, as shown in Figure 5.

There are a number of useful additional lists accessible from the fourth tab in the main top menu of the pro-



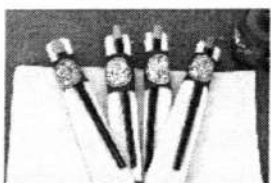
Figure 5. "Listen-record-compare" exercise on tab 14 of phoneme /i:/

As can be gleaned from the above description, the content of the course is extremely rich: the blurb on the box boasts over 35 thousand audio recordings! This matches the information to be found on the *SuperMemo* website of the product: http://www.supermemo.pl/say_it_right. Interestingly, on the *Atena* website (<http://www.owatena.com.pl/index.php?mod=prod&dv=9&poz=146&search=say%20it%20right>) the figure provided is “over 40,000”. Whichever is closer to the truth, the number of recordings is enormous: the learner has a lot to choose from. There are 46 phoneme sections in the British accent variety, and 42 phoneme sections in the American accent variety, each with two animated articulator cross-sections and front-view lip videoclips, one for either of the two English accents. Each section contains between 14 and 17 screenfuls of data (the latter number for some especially allophonically complex phonemes, such as /t/, for example). There are also more than 1,200 good quality captioned photographs, showing a variety of artifacts, and illustrating words containing specific phonemes, such as this in Figure 6. With all these riches, incidentally, it would be nice to be offered a search facility, which, however, is sadly lacking.

Now, for the analytic/evaluative part of this review. The form of the package is beyond reproach. As can be seen in the reproduced screenshots, the user interface of *Say it right* is clear, user-friendly, commendably uncluttered and quite elegant. The quality of the audio and video recordings, most made by native speakers of British and American English, is extremely good (they were recorded in a professional studio). All program functions work correctly. The user has



a Cherokee chief



Chinese chopsticks

Figure 6. Phrase illustration: /tʃ/

the choice of installing it on the hard drive or running it entirely from the DVD (with the unavoidably slower operation in the latter case). The system requirements of the program are modest for contemporary PC computers (>1 GHz processor, > 800x600 graphics, > ½ GB RAM and 2 GB free on the hard drive). The book is very well printed, and the box holding the book and the DVD is robust, with a Velcro-snap flap revealing some useful program blurbs.

For a professional reviewer the content of the course is, naturally, more interesting. I will treat of the advantages first. The undeniable forte of *Say it right*, of which the authors are fully aware and justifiably proud, is its Polish target. Most multimedia EFL courses on our market are at best localizations of L1-insensitive products of the leading EFL publishers, such as Longman or Oxford, with the obvious inadequacies in the Polish setting. *Atena* and *SuperMemo* have teamed up to produce a truly Polish product for Polish learners. This means, among others, that

the choice of words, phrases, sentences and minimal pairs for practice was dictated by the known issues and problems which Polish learners have with EFL pronunciation. This can only be done on the basis of a lot of background reading and/or Polish teaching experience, and it is obvious that authors of *Say it right* have both.

Second, the material presented is not only very rich, as mentioned above, but also very well structured (but for some reason vowels come first on DVD and second in the book). Each phoneme is introduced and practiced in gradually expanding contextual settings: words, phrases, sentences. For each phoneme the learner will find similar minimal pairs and "listen-(record)-repeat" tasks, which creates certain expectations and makes the systematic progression through the course easier. Finally, the word lists appended at the end of the course are a welcome addition because, as mentioned in the blurb, they collect for the first time phonetic material so far scattered in various courses and applications.

Third, and again explicitly mentioned by the authors in the blurbs and introduction, the course is very flexible. It can be used both for self-access study and in the classroom under teacher's supervision. It can appeal to learners on various levels of proficiency, both because the content of the longer recorded stretches, such as sentences, is relatively simple, but also because the authors decided to use Polish as metalanguage. Also the pedagogical assumptions of the course are not defined too strictly, which means that it can be used in a variety of settings, approaches and methods used in EFL teaching and learning. With the renewed attention to form in foreign language pedagogy, observed over the last decade or so, this flexibility in exploiting the rich content of this pronunciation course is naturally very welcome.

In the remainder of this review I will briefly discuss some points of criticism. Most of them are really about some technical problems with the DVD content which can be easily corrected in the future editions of the product. But I will start with the more global issues. First, the actual methodological/pedagogical status of the reviewed product. While I have so far referred to it as "course" for ease of exposition, I am far from being convinced that *Say it right* is indeed a course or a textbook ('podręcznik'), both terms used profusely in the descriptions of the product. My main argument against this classification is methodological: a course or a textbook must be grounded in some explicit pedagogical approach or method. This is usually openly stated in the introduction to the "teacher's book" part of the course. It also has long-reaching ramifications for the structure of the resource itself: its composition, organization, types of exercises, etc. A course based on the communicative method will look different from one inspired by the notional syllabus. Yet, the authors of *Say it right* pretend (because they are simply too experienced not to know better) that what they offer is

“podręcznik [...] z kursem multimedialnym” (‘a textbook [...] with a multimedia course’; from blurb). This is, of course, the rather obvious downside of the flexibility of the resource mentioned earlier as its forte. On page 5 of the hardcopy introduction the authors say the following: “Its [the course’s – WS] great advantage is that we can work freely, because there is no obligatory sequence of chapters”. This is, of course, true; but it shows that the status of *Say it right* is closer to a glossary of English phonemes than to a full-fledged course. A pedagogical glossary like this is a viable endeavour, so my criticism here is not with the content of the product but its label, which can be misleading to many.

My other critique of the course (and I will continue to use the term not because it is adequate but because it is handy) has to do with some technical issues. First, as is customary in pronunciation-oriented applications, English phonemes are listed with some keywords which contain them. There is no standard list of such keywords, so basically each author decides for herself. This does not mean that the choice is entirely inconsequential for the learner (see Sobkowiak 2000 and 2004). Here are three keywords used in *Say it right* to illustrate English phonemes, with their definitions found on www:

- /ai/ - *eyetie*, an expression used in the United Kingdom to mean an Italian. It may be considered objectionable (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eyetie>),
- /oi/ - *toyboy*, a young man indulged by a woman who is older than he; an attractive young man (http://www.angielski.edu.pl/cpe/toyboy_4726.html; also see *toyboy* on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5ZsqCFt1w>),
- /g/ - *goosegog*, someone who will not take the hint and leave you alone (when you and your boyfriend are trying to get a good snog in before the night is over and your friend just stands there watching you; <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=goosegog>),

Now, the desire to find keywords with the maximum number of target phonemes in them could be understood, but it can easily lead to excess, as shown in the definitions above. It should be remembered that the course is aimed at learners at any level, including beginners. The present reviewer had to admit ignorance of *goosegog*, however, which led him, via *snog*, to its definition in the *Urban Dictionary*: “to play tonsil hockey”, which in turn was not completely transparent before it was finally illustrated with the picture in Figure 7. The authors of *Say it right* may like to rethink their choice of phoneme keywords in the next edition of the course!

Further to the issue of phonetic keywords. The somewhat objectionable ones quoted above appear in the main phoneme selection screen seen in Figure 3., but the choice in the “phonetic symbols” list in one of the appendices is quite different (and more conservative): *kite*, *high*, *try* for /ai/, *coin*, *boy* for /oi/, and



Figure 7. The illustration of "snog" in the *Urban Dictionary*

geese, *giggle* for /g/. These keywords, however, are not clickable, so the learner can neither listen to them, nor navigate to the appropriate part of the course, which is certainly a disappointment to the generation of "homo zappiens" (a website with no hyperlinks on it is practically unheard of nowadays). Some other problems with the "phonetic symbols" list are due to the complex and subtle differences between British and American pronunciation. For example, the /ɑ:/ phoneme is listed twice: with *start* and *father*

both flags are attached (which means the sound occurs in both varieties of English), but with *lot* and *odd* only the American flag is attached. To add to the confusion, in the description of the phoneme in the main part of the program we are told that the two pronunciations do not differ significantly. Similar confusions crop up in the case of /əʊ/ vs /oʊ/, and /ʌ/ vs /ə/.

There are more such problems in the phoneme description/advice pages. For example, the American /ɜ:/ vowel is "explained" as a product of the 'schwa' /ʌ/ and the retroflex /r/. Then, doubtless due to the unfortunate oversight in proofreading, the same "explanation" is repeated verbatim in the screen of the British /ɜ:/ vowel. A sundry collection of errors and flaws in the phoneme description pages are due to: the choice of words to exemplify phonemes, transcription issues, confusion of sounds with letters, reference to the (otherwise unexamined) Polish pronunciation, stylistic infelicities, and downright typos (very few!). The following is a representative list; an exhaustive catalogue would be longer, of course. They are all, however, rather slight technical problems, easy to put right in the next editions of the product.

- In the schwa spelling section, it is claimed that the most common spelling is <o>, like in *bosom*: a rather unfortunate choice on a number of counts (rare and stylistically marked word, grapho-phonemically hard due to the unexpected /ʊ/ in the first syllable, not clear which <o> is schwa),
- In the /u:/ section we learn that this sound in British English is articulated "between Polish <u> and <y>", which is clearly confusing sound and letter notation (there is no /y/ sound in Polish), especially as /y/ is also used in other places in the course to mean /i/.
- In the /o:/ section the learner is instructed to form his/her lips into "the shape of a vertical ellipsis (or an egg standing on end)", a rather acrobatic act, and quite unnecessary, as neither of the two videoclips (British or American) demonstrates such an extreme articulatory movement.

- In the /əʊ/-/oʊ/ section the Polish substitute is transcribed inconsistently, as either /ou/ or /oɫ/. Likewise, in the /v/ section, the learner will read that the letter <v> is missing in Polish and normally substituted by <w> in borrowings such as *weto* or *wideo*, due to which “Poles mix up the two consonants”. This confusion of spelling and phonetic transcription for Pol(gl)ish pronunciations in *Say it right* is doubtless due to the laudable desire to simplify the notation, but it can misfire badly.
- In the /b/ section the learner is told that “in the <mb> spelling the /b/ is mute (*crumb, dumb, plumber*)”; but how about *member, number, remember* and many other such common words?
- In the /s/ section <z> (as in *waltz*) is listed among the most common of all 17 /s/ spellings. This is rather strange, considering that this spelling only occurs in such borrowings as: *blitz, eczema, hertz, mezzo, pizza, pizzicato, quartz, schizophrenia, waltz*. The “common spellings” data in the sections for other phonemes are sometimes similarly suspect.

Finally, the issue signaled above in passing: final (de)voicing. The fiction of maintaining, for pedagogical purposes, that word-final obstruents are voiced in English is nowhere exposed more poignantly than in this course, where the British English speaker, Joanna Haracz-Lewandowska, devoices completely in this

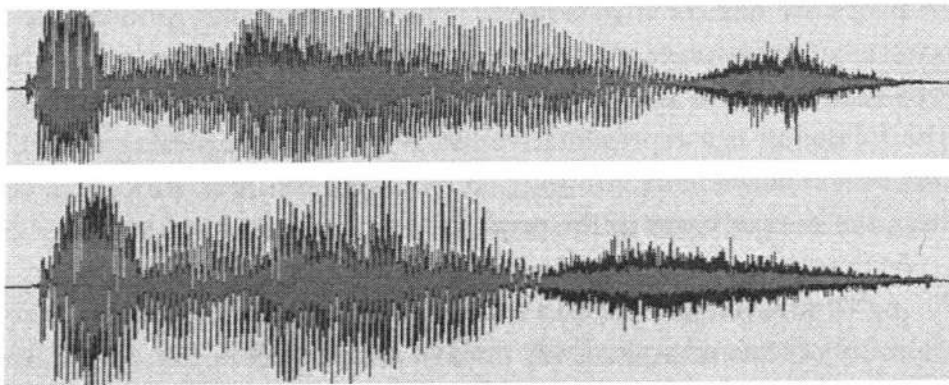


Figure 8. The minimal pair *believe-belief*

context, at the same time retaining a clear contrast in the length of the preceding vowel. This is especially obvious in her recordings of minimal pairs supposedly illustrating the word-final voicing contrast in the dedicated section of the course, listed at the end of the consonant part. This medium does not allow me to insert a recording of examples, but I can use the graphical representation to show my point. Figure 8 contains the soundwave graphs of the minimal pair *believe-belief*. It is clearly seen that the contrast is in timing of the vowel and the final fricative, rather than in the voicing of the latter, as claimed in *Say it right*. As mentioned before, however, this is a complex question, both phonetically and

pedagogically, which I have no chance of presenting here, even in an approximative fashion. All I want to say at this juncture is that a diligent learner with a reasonably good ear is bound to be rather confused.

Summing up: *Say it right* is a welcome addition to the rather meager offer of pronunciation resources prepared with the Polish learner in mind, currently available on the Polish market. It is huge in terms of recorded content, it shows a lot of editorial effort and care about the form of the product, it is flexible enough to serve as useful resource in a large variety of educational contexts (but it would be even more so if all recordings were downloadable as mp3 files to listen to on the go in the popular podcast manner). While it is definitely not an actual "course" or "textbook" in the strict sense of the term, it remains an interesting offer of what is best categorized as an extended and augmented lexicon of English sounds for EFL learners.

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