

[Intermediate EFL Students' Self-Assessment of Phonetically Difficult Words in English]

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[Abstract] *This article presents a study that investigates a series of words in English that university students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the intermediate level of EFL proficiency (henceforth – participants) find difficult to pronounce. The present study aims at soliciting the participants' individual lists of phonetically difficult words and comments upon why these words are challenging to pronounce. The results of the quantitative analysis indicate that phonetically difficult words are associated with the segmental elements that are absent in the phonological inventory of the Norwegian language, the participants' first language. These findings are presented and discussed in the article.*

[Keywords] *English as a Foreign Language (EFL); intermediate level of EFL proficiency; phonetically difficult words (PDWs)*

[1] Introduction

This article presents and discusses a study that aims at establishing a set of English words that university students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) whose first language (L1) is Norwegian consider difficult to pronounce in their oral discourse. The focus of the study is on phonetically difficult words (henceforth – PDWs) that pose challenges to a group of university EFL students (henceforth – participants) on the intermediate level of proficiency, i.e. B1/B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, the present study is embedded in Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2011) approach to the subjective evaluation of PDWs by EFL students. The approach proposed by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) involves attention to how intermediate EFL students self-assess their difficulties with English suprasegmentals, inclusive of PDWs.

Informed by Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2011) methodology, the present study aims at identifying PDWs in the participants' oral discourse by means of soliciting their self-assessment of PDWs in English. Self-assessment is a well-researched topic in applied linguistics and EFL studies (Kissling & O'Donnell, 2015; Muñoz & Álvarez, 2007; O'Brien, 2019; Sánchez et al., 2019; Sardegna & McGregor, 2013; Strachan, Kennedy, & Trofimovich, 2019; Uchida & Sugimoto, 2019). In general, the term self-assessment is defined as "a judgment of own level of performance" (Raaijmakers et al., 2019: 21). In applied linguistics, self-assessment is regarded as learners' ability to provide evaluation of their own current performance and juxtapose it with their desired performance (Kissling & O'Donnell, 2015). In relation to PDWs, self-assessment in the present study is regarded as EFL learners' ability i) to evaluate whether or not their pronunciation of certain English words deviates from the expected standard pronunciation and results in errors in pronunciation, and ii) to identify the causes of the deviation. Such an approach to self-assessment regarding PDWs is in line with the prior literature which argues that self-assessment is involved in EFL learners' language awareness, beliefs, and attitudes associated with the language learning process (Sardegna, Lee, & Kusey, 2018, p. 84).

Whilst there is a substantial body of previous research on self-assessment in applied linguistics, little is known about self-assessment in relation to pronunciation practices in EFL (Nugteren et al., 2018; Sardegna, Lee, & Kusey, 2018). The study presented and discussed in this article seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge concerning EFL learners' self-assessment of PDWs as a part of their pronunciation behaviour and practices. This article is structured as follows. First, previous research associated with PDWs in EFL studies will be outlined (sub-section 1.1). Second, EFL teaching and learning in Norway will be presented (sub-section 1.2). Thereafter, the present study will be introduced and discussed (section 2). Finally, the article will be concluded with a summary of the major findings and their linguo-didactic implications (section 3).

[1.1] Previous research associated with PDWs in EFL studies

Previous research associated with PDWs in EFL studies is represented by seminal publications by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011; 2012; 2013), Nowacka (2018), and Sobkowiak (2004; 2000). Given that the present study is based upon research methodology proposed by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), it seems pertinent to focus the meta-analysis of prior research on her approach to PDWs in EFL learners' oral discourse. One of the principal arguments made by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) involves a contention that PDWs are "highly detrimental to successful communication in that they significantly decrease the speaker's comprehensibility and intelligibilty" (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2011, p. 286). Another argument that is present in Szpyra-Kozłowska's research (2011) is based upon the assumption that PDWs are associated with phonological misrepresentations and interference factors.

Following these assumptions, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) conducted an experimental study with Polish L1 intermediate EFL learners, who were requested to provide a list of PDWs and comment on them (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2011, p. 286). The results of Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2011) investigation indicate that PDWs are associated with the following variables: i) spelling-based forms (e.g. *tough*, *enough*); ii) phonetic false friends (e.g. English *pan* vs. Polish *pan*); iii) word stress (e.g. '*guitar* vs. *guit'ar*, *hotel*, vs. *hot'el*); iv) difficult consonant clusters (e.g. *three*, *throw*); v) longer words (e.g. *picturesque*, *quotation*); vi) liquids (e.g. *murderers*, *portray*); vii) alternating forms (e.g. *society* vs. *social*); and viii) high front vowels (e.g. *preceding*, *repeating*). Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) interprets these findings as highlighting a need to focus on the pronunciation of words rather than individual English sounds in EFL teaching and learning.

In another study, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2012) assumes that PDWs are caused by their incorrect phonological storage in the learners' phonetic memory. In order to empirically investigate this assumption, she instructed a group of advanced EFL learners to read and record a set of sentences with 80 PDWs. The experimental aim is to identify sources of PDWs in order to establish their hierarchy, and to juxtapose the participants' subjective evaluation of PDWs with the use of PDWs in the learners' actual speech production. The results of the analysis indicate that false friends, e.g. *gigantic* and *Disney*, are particularly difficult for Polish L1 advanced EFL learners to pronounce. In terms of difficulty, false friends are followed by spelling (e.g. *hideous*, *thoroughly*) and alternating forms (e.g. *courteous*, *advantageous*). Notably, consonant clusters (e.g. *throws*), liquids (e.g. *regularly*) and long words (e.g. *congratulatory*) do not appear to cause significant problems to advanced EFL learners. Concurrently with these data, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2012) examines the subjective evaluation of the factors that contribute to the degree of difficulty in PDWs. These factors are i) length (e.g. *unintelligibility*), ii) low frequency of occurrence (e.g. *satisfactorily*), iii) the presence of th + s clusters (e.g. *sixths*), and iv) spelling (e.g. *thoroughly*).

Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2012) contention that PDWs appear to be detrimental to communication is further investigated in an experimental study that examined English L1 speakers' judgements concerning suprasegmental and segmental inaccuracies (Szpyra-

-Kozłowska, 2013). The aim of that study was to elucidate how PDWs in oral discourse in English by adult Polish L1 EFL speakers are evaluated by English L1 interlocutors as far as comprehensibility and intelligibility are concerned. The results of the evaluation analysis indicate that English L1 speakers consider PDWs in Polish EFL speakers' speech to be barely intelligible, hindering communication, and irritating (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2013).

It should be noted that Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2013) approach towards PDWs in EFL is concomitant with the research agenda formulated by Sobkowiak (2004; 2000; 1996). In particular, Sobkowiak (2004; 2000; 1996) analyses PDWs through the lens of measuring the lexico-phonetic difficulty of English lexical items. Sobkowiak (2004) compiles a phonetic difficulty index that involves such measures as i) salient grapho-phonemic difficulties that Polish L1 EFL learners encounter whilst reading in English; ii) the most common phonemic L1-interference problems; and iii) interference pronunciation errors. Sobkowiak's (2004) phonetic difficulty index is currently programmed as a computer algorithm. According to Sobkowiak (2004), it can be used for querying electronic dictionaries, as well as for semi-automatic pronunciation exercises in EFL settings.

Whereas Sobkowiak's (2004) approach towards PDWs appears to focus on lexico-phonetic difficulties, Nowacka (2018) addresses the issue of PDWs within the context of the relationship between local and global errors in spelling on the one hand and EFL pronunciation instruction on the other hand. Nowacka (2018) argues that PDWs that are caused by English spelling are not L1-specific, but universal. In order to verify this assumption, Nowacka (2018) tested university students of English who hail from different L1 backgrounds, such as Kazakh, Malay, Polish, Turkish, Tajik, and Ukrainian. They were instructed to read and record a number of PDWs taken from a prior study conducted by Sobkowiak (1996). In a separate session, the students were requested to listen to the PDWs and choose the correct spelling from the list provided. Nowacka (2018) reports several patterns that appear to cause problems with PDWs to the majority of students regardless of their L1. They are represented by the mispronunciation of suffixes (e.g. *-ous*, *-age*, and *-ate*) and mute consonant letters (e.g. *comb*) (Nowacka, 2018, p. 463).

It is evident from the meta-analysis of the prior literature that there is a wealth of research associated with PDWs in EFL learners' oral discourse. However, little is currently known about PDWs that cause problems to Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners (Rugesæter, 2014). The study described in this article seeks to generate new knowledge concerning PDWs in Norwegian L1 EFL learners' oral discourse in English. However, prior to proceeding to the study, it seems relevant to outline the context of EFL teaching and learning in Norway.

[1.2] EFL teaching and learning in Norway

In Norway, there is a growing tendency to regard English as a second language rather than a foreign language (Busby, 2018, p. 3). Being able to communicate in English is seen as a vital skill in Norway, since "Norwegians need English both to work and live in Norway, to communicate with native and non-native speakers around the world, and to

participate in higher education" (Rindal, 2014, p. 9). As far as the teaching and learning of English in Norway is concerned, it is a compulsory subject for all students from Year 1 onwards. English is introduced early in primary school starting from the age of six, "so that all children will have studied the language for at least 6 years when leaving lower secondary school" (Olsen, 1999, p. 192). By the time 16-year-old Norwegian EFL learners start upper secondary school, "they have on average reached an upper-intermediate proficiency level (CEFR B1/B2)" (Bøhn, 2018).

EFL learners at Norwegian upper secondary schools are usually referred to as proficient users of English (Busby, 2018; Rindal, 2014). Arguably, their ease of learning English is facilitated by Norwegian, their L1 (Busby, 2018; Rindal, 2014; Olsen, 1999), since both English and Norwegian are Germanic languages that share similarities in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, especially as far the presence of diphthongs in both languages is concerned (Johansson, 2002). Another variable that aids the learning of English is related to extensive daily exposure to the English language via various media, especially television, the internet, and English-mediated social networks (Busby, 2018, p. 3).

The teaching and learning of English in Norway is based upon standards that involve several competence aims (Udir, 2019). These aims address i) language and language learning; ii) communication; iii) culture, society, and literature (Udir, 2019). In terms of the basic skills, EFL learners are expected to be able i) to express themselves in writing and orally; ii) to read in English; iii) to calculate in English; and iv) to use digital tools in English. Whereas the development of oral skills is prioritised, the teaching and learning of English pronunciation does not seem to play a central role in the development of communicative competences of a Norwegian L1 EFL learner (Drew, Oostdam, & Han van Toorenburg, 2007). It can be summarised that on the one hand there is a seemingly epiphenomenal status of English pronunciation in Norwegian EFL contexts, yet on the other hand this is concurrent with the typological closeness of the phonological systems of English and Norwegian, which "makes it rare for the problems to be so severe that communication breaks down" (Rugesæter, 2012, p. 121). This observation begs the question whether or not Norwegian L1 EFL learners on the intermediate B1/B2 levels of proficiency (Council of Europe, 2011) would have PDWs in their oral discourse in English. In the following section of the article, an empirical study will be presented that aims to elucidate how Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners self-assess their possible PDWs and provide reflections on their causes.

[2] The present study

As mentioned above, it has been observed in the literature that Norwegian L1 EFL learners are proficient in English due to a host of variables, e.g. the typological proximity between English and Norwegian, out-of-classroom exposure to the English language, and the prestigious status of English in Norway (Busby, 2018; Rindal, 2014). Concurrently with this observation, however, the current literature in EFL studies reports a notable lack of focus on the explicit teaching of English pronunciation in Norwegian EFL contexts

(Rugesæter, 2012). Taking these observations into account, the following research question has been formulated:

RQ: Would Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners experience PDWs in their oral discourse in English?

In order to investigate this research question, this study seeks to follow the methodological premises formulated by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who employs a self-assessment approach towards PDWs in oral discourse by intermediate EFL learners. Two hypotheses are formulated in the present study. Hypothesis 1 is based upon a study by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who argues that PDWs may be a universal phenomenon and may eventuate regardless of EFL learners' L1. Furthermore, Hypothesis 1 factors in those studies (Rugesæter, 2014) which indicate that pronunciation does not play a substantial role in EFL teaching and learning in Norway – which, consequently, might lead to errors associated with the mispronunciation of segmentals and suprasegmentals by Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners. Following Hypothesis 1, it was hypothesised in this study that there would be a range of PDWs that the participants consider problematic to pronounce in their oral discourse in English.

In contrast to Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 involves the contention that Norwegian L1 EFL learners generally manifest a substantial level of EFL proficiency due to a host of variables (Rindal, 2014). Following this contention, it was theorised in Hypothesis 2 that the participants would not identify PDWs in their oral discourse in English due to the lack of problems associated with English pronunciation. Based upon these two hypotheses and the research question, the following specific research aims are formulated:

- [i] to establish the frequency of self-assessed PDWs in the participants' oral discourse in English;
- [ii] to identify the self-reported causes of PDWs in the participants' oral discourse in English.

It should perhaps be reiterated that the present study focuses upon the participants' self-assessment of the PDWs which they think they find difficult to pronounce rather than the objective assessment of the words that they pronounce with difficulty.

[2.1] Participants

The study involves 18 participants (10 females, 8 males, mean age = 22, standard deviation = 7.7). All participants are first-year university students who are enrolled in the English programme at a regional university in Norway. The participants' L1 is Norwegian, and English is a foreign language to all of them. There are neither bilinguals nor English L1 speakers among the participants.

The participants are estimated to be on the intermediate B1/B2 level of proficiency in English according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011). As far as the participants' English proficiency level is concerned, the following should be explained. In Norway, there

are no university entrance exams in English, and prospective students are admitted to university programmes based upon the grades from their school-leaving exams. Norwegian secondary school leavers are expected to pass their school-leaving exam in English on the B1/B2 levels of proficiency.

The participants were requested to sign a Consent form that allows the author of the present article to process, analyse and publish the participants' written data for scientific purposes. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' real names are coded. The following coding scheme is used here: P (as in participant) followed by a number (thus P1, P2, P3... P18).

[2.2] Methods and procedure

The methodological premises in the present study are based upon research methodology described in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011). In accordance with that methodology, the participants were requested to reflect in writing upon those English words that they find difficult to pronounce in their oral communication in English. The participants were asked to write down those words (PDWs) and indicate what they consider to be a possible cause and/or causes of the difficulty associated with PDWs (see Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2011).

As far as the procedure in the present study is concerned, the participants were given two weeks to write their reflections upon PDWs and the accompanying comments concerning the cause and/or causes of the PDWs. Given that reflective practices associated with PDWs require a high level of self-awareness, a sufficient command of English, as well as knowledge of English phonetics, the procedure was embedded in the mid-course part of a course in English phonetics after the participants had studied the phonological system of English, peculiarities of articulation in English, and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). In order to facilitate the compilation of the list of PDWs, the participants were advised by me to monitor their own speech output in English (inclusive of classroom discussions, answers to questions, and reading aloud) during their seminars in English phonetics, functional grammar of English, English literature, and English and American civilisation. In addition, it was suggested that the participants should monitor their spontaneous speech in English and oral out-of-classroom discourse in English. The participants were instructed to write down instances of PDWs in the aforementioned situations associated with the oral use of the English language in the form of the list and to comment upon the PDWs in terms of what they perceive as the cause(s) of the PDWs. Once the written reflections were ready, the participants were asked to send them electronically to me.

[2.3] Corpus

The corpus of the participants' PDWs comprises 107 tokens exclusive of the participants' comments and reflections upon the causes of PDWs. The analysis of the corpus using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, 2011) yielded the descriptive statistics of PDWs per group of participants, which are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Corpus of PDWs

N	Statistical Measure	Statistical Values
1	Total N	107
2	Mean	5.8
3	Standard deviation	3.8
4	Minimum	2
5	Maximum	15

[2.4] Results and discussion

In relation to the research question in the present study, it is evident from the results of the data analysis that all participants report the presence of PDWs in their oral discourse in English. As seen in Table 1, PDWs range from 2 to 15 per individual participant (mean PDWs = 5.8). These findings are in contrast to Hypothesis 2, which is based upon the assumption that the participants would not report PDWs in their oral discourse due to the absence of such PDWs. Hence, hypothesis 2 is rejected.

Judging from the data, Hypothesis 1 is supported by the present findings. In particular, it is assumed in Hypothesis 1 that there would be a range of PDWs that the participants consider problematic to pronounce in their oral discourse in English. The analysis of the corpus in SPSS has yielded the frequency of the PDWs per group of participants. The frequency of occurrence of PDWs in the corpus is shown in Table 2, commencing with the most frequent PDWs ($N = 4$) and concluding with those PDWs that occur once in the corpus ($N = 1$). In each frequency band, the PDWs are presented in alphabetical order.

Table 2. Frequency of PDWs in the Corpus

N	N of occurrence	PDWs
1	$N = 4$	<i>Three</i>
2	$N = 3$	<i>Stairs</i>
3	$N = 2$	<i>Colonel, eyes, lettuce, queue, this, thinking, very, was, words</i>
4	$N = 1$	<i>Accountable, Americans, as, bemused, benches, birthday, blood, bowl, boys, buzz, calligraphy, certificate, choir, clothes, comfortable, compartmentalisation, contains, confederate, country, courteous, crunched, dispensation, doors, earthquake, ears, easel, eaves, fire extinguisher, foreign, generation, gins, glistened, graves, hands, his, Italians, knowledge, literature, mountains, names, nickers, nose, obliterated, particularly, pins, please, preface, radar, rarely, regularly, representatives, ridges, seventies, shoes, sloth, southern, squirrel, steak, strange, surface, there, they, that, thin, throat, through, thus, torture, turkey, valuable, vegetables, vest, war, water, went, west, wife, will, zero, zip, zoo</i>

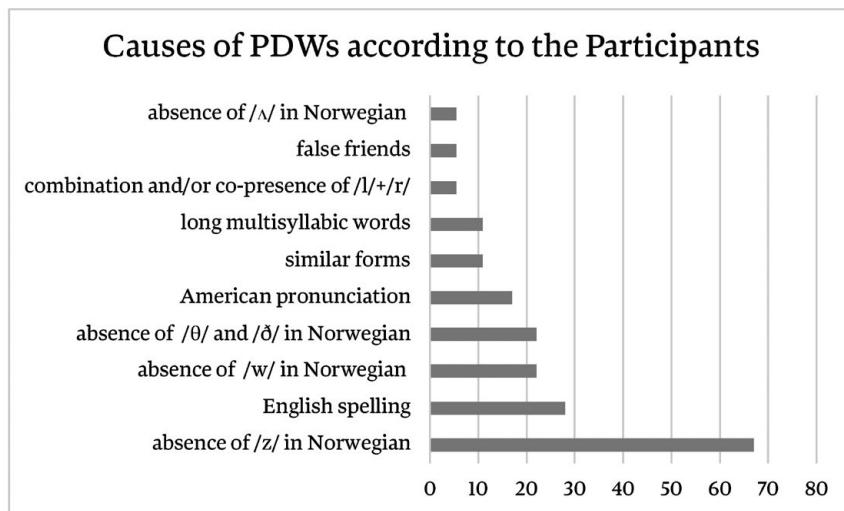
The analysis of the participants' comments and their reflections upon the causes of difficulties associated with their respective PDWs in oral discourse in English yielded several reasons for the occurrence of PDWs. These reasons are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Participants' Comments upon the Causes of PDWs in Their Oral Discourse

N	Comments concerning the causes of PDWs	Examples	Percentage of participants who made the comment
1	The absence of the English consonant sound [z] in Norwegian	[æs] instead of [æz] in <i>as</i>	67%
2	English spelling	[blud] instead of [blʌd] in <i>blood</i>	28%
3	The absence of the inter-dental consonant sounds [θ] and [ð] in Norwegian	[bɜ:sdeɪ] instead of [bɜ:θdeɪ] in <i>birthday</i>	22%
4	The absence of the bilabial English [w] sound in Norwegian resulting in the substitution of [w] for [v] and vice versa	[west] instead of [vest] in <i>vest</i>	22%
5	American English pronunciation of the PDW whereas the participants prefer and speak British English	[`lɪtrətʃər] instead of [`lɪtrətʃə] in <i>literature</i>	17%
6	Diphthongs instead of monophthongs due to similar forms	[`nəʊledʒ] instead of [`nɒlidʒ] in <i>knowledge</i>	11%
7	Long words	[`faɪər ɪ'stɪŋgʃər] instead of [`faɪər ɪk'stɪŋgwɪʃə] in <i>fire extinguisher</i>	11%
8	The combination and/or co-presence of consonant sounds [l]+[r]	[`rejulɪ] instead of [`regjuləlɪ] in <i>regularly</i>	5.5%
9	Similarly written words in Norwegian and English (false friends)	[`tø:tʃə] instead of [`tɔ:tʃə] in <i>torture</i>	5.5%
10	The absence of the English short vowel sound [ʌ] in Norwegian	[`køntri] instead of [`kʌntri] in <i>country</i>	5.5%

As seen in Table 3, the causes that are listed by the participants with regard to the occurrence of PDWs in their oral discourse in English seem to be unequally distributed. Whereas the majority of participants tend to see the major cause of PDWs as the absence of the consonant [z] in their L1, Norwegian, there are also less frequent reasons that are thought to account for the occurrence of PDWs (see Figure 1 below). In Figure 1, the causes of PDWs are plotted in the form of the percentages of participants who explicitly refer to the causes of PDWs in their comments and reflections.

Figure 1. Causes of PDWs according to the Participants



Further in this sub-section of the article, attention will be focused upon a discussion of the causes to which the participants attribute the PDWs in their oral discourse in English, starting with the most frequent causes of PDWs and concluding with the relatively minor ones.

[2.4.1] The absence of the English consonant sound [z] in Norwegian as a cause of PDWs

It is evident from Table 3 and Figure 1 that 67% of all participants refer to the absence of the consonant sound [z] in their L1, Norwegian, as one of the main causes of PDWs in their oral discourse in English. The participants' most frequent PDWs that contain the consonant sound [z] are as follows: *stairs* (N = 3), *eyes* (N = 2), and *was* (N = 2). Additionally, there are less frequent PDWs with [z] that occur once in the corpus, for instance *as*, *Americans*, *bemused*, *benches*, *boys*, *buzz*, *contains*, *doors*, *ears*, *easel*, *eaves*, *gins*, *graves*, *hands*, *his*, *Italians*, *mountains*, *names*, *nickers*, *nose*, *pins*, *please*, *representatives*, *ridges*, *seventies*, *shoes*, *words*, *zero*, *zip*, and *zoo*. In contrast to these findings, the participants in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) do not seem to self-assess the English consonant sound [z] as a significant cause of pronunciation difficulties in their speech in English. This can be explained by the presence of the minimal pair [s] – [z] in the Polish language, the participants' L1 (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2011). In the present study, however, the PDWs that eventuate due to the lack of [z] in the participants' L1 constitute 36% of the entire corpus of PWDs in the corpus.

To reiterate, 67% of participants deem the absence of the consonant sound [z] in their L1 to be a major source of PDWs. Moreover, the participants provide a substantial number of examples of PDWs with [z]. In this regard, it seems pertinent to exemplify this finding by the following quote, e.g. “The word ‘seventies’ I pronounce as [‘sevəntɪs]

and not ['seventiz]. It is also a very common mistake made by most Norwegians" (Participant P 13). It should be noted that the quote represents typical comments made by the participants concerning PDWs with the English consonant sound [z]. Usually, the participants explain the causes of PDWs with [z] by referring to the absence of this consonant in the phonological system of Norwegian.

[2.4.2] English spelling as a cause of PDWs

Another frequent cause of PDWs is ascribed by 28% of all participants to the English spelling system. The PDWs whose sources of difficulty are attributed to spelling are *colonel* (N = 2), *lettuce* (N = 2), *queue* (N = 2), and a number of PDWs that occur once, e.g. *blood*, *bowl*, *choir*, *calligraphy*, *courteous*, *glistened*, and *steak*. These findings are in accordance with the results reported by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who established that the participants in her study referred to spelling-based forms as one of the major sources of PDWs. Similarly to the participants in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), the participants in the present investigation observed that mute letters pose difficulties to their understanding of how to pronounce words that contain them. For instance, one of the participants indicated that the PDW *queue* is challenging to pronounce, because "I try pronouncing all the letters at once but in this word -eue gets pronounced with a [u]" (Participant 7).

[2.4.3] The absence of the bilabial English [w] sound in Norwegian as a cause of PDWs

The absence of the bilabial consonant sound [w] in the participants' L1 appears to result in those PDWs that are characterised by the substitution of [w] for [v] and vice versa. According to the participants, these PDWs are *squirrel*, *very*, *vest*, *war*, *water*, *went*, *west*, *wife*, and *will*. Typically, 22% of those participants who mention this cause of PDWs refer to confusion on their part as far as the pronunciation of the word-initial [w] is concerned in e.g. *water* and *went*, where [w] is substituted by [v]. Concurrently with this phenomenon, the participants indicate that they experience difficulties with PDWs that contain the word-initial [v], as in *very* and *vest*. In those PDWs the participants tend to substitute [w] for [v], as illustrated by the comments made by Participant P 6, e.g. "I am, like many other Norwegians, used to the two letters making the same sound, the 'w' sound comes more natural than its 'v' counterpart".

Another case is represented by the PDW *squirrel*, whose difficulty rests with the three-consonant cluster [skw]. In this regard, participant P 17 indicates that "the [skw] sound combination is highly unusual". It is evident from the participants' comments that the absence of the bilabial sound [w] in the Norwegian language contributes to participants' inability to differentiate between the contrast [w] – [v], which, in turn, results in PDWs that contain the word-initial bilabial sound [w].

[2.4.4] The absence of the inter-dental consonant sounds [θ] and [ð] in Norwegian as a cause of PDWs

The results of the data analysis reveal that 22% of all participants regard the absence of the interdental consonants [θ] and [ð] in Norwegian as a cause of PDWs in their speech in English. In particular, they illustrate this cause by the PDWs *three* (N = 4), *this* (N = 2), *thinking* (N = 2), as well as some PDWs that occur once in the corpus, e.g. *birthday*, *clothes*, *sloth*, *that*, *there*, *they*, *thin*, *throat*, *through* and *thus*. These findings lend support to Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who notes similar problems experienced by Polish L1 EFL learners on the intermediate level of proficiency. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the inter-dental consonants [θ] and [ð] are often referred to in the literature as a potential source of pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL learners whose L1 does not contain interdentals (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Mueller, 2019). The latter observation is illustrated by the comments made by Participant P 8, who indicates that "My common mistake is to replace the sounds [θ] and [ð] with [t] and [d]". Whereas the participant notices a certain amelioration of her pronunciation difficulties that are associated with the inter-dental consonants, she admits that the PDWs containing interdentals seem to persist in her oral discourse in English. Notably, it is observed in the present data that the majority of PDWs with interdentals contain the English interdental consonants [θ] and [ð] in the word-initial position (for instance *that*, *there*, *they*, *thinking*, *thin*, *this*, *three*, and *thus*), whilst other positions in PDWs seem to be epiphenomenal (e.g. *birthday*, *clothes*, and *sloth*).

[2.4.5] PDWs associated with American pronunciation of the words in the participant's otherwise British English as a cause of PDWs

It is seen in Table 3 that 17% of all participants indicate that there are PDWs in their oral discourse which are accounted for by the insertion of American English (AmE) pronunciation into their British English (BrE). In other words, whereas the participants prefer BrE and typically use this variety of English in their communication, they report that there are several PDWs which they find difficult to pronounce in BrE and so they consistently pronounce them in AmE. These PDWs are *words* (N = 2), *literature* (N = 1), *southern* (N = 1). To illustrate this finding, let us consider the following explanation written by Participant P 3, who indicates that "While my preferred variety of the English language is British, the tendency to pronounce the letter [r] much like in the American variety is a problem". Presumably, the participant experiences an intrusion of AmE which is subjectively perceived as a problem that compromises oral communication in BrE. These findings differ from those of Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), where this phenomenon is not reported. To reiterate, the sources of pronunciation difficulties that are self-assessed by the participants in the study by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) comprise spelling-based forms, false friends, word stress, difficult consonant clusters, longer words, liquids, alternating forms, and high front vowels. There is no reference in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) to varieties of the English language as a potential cause of PDWs.

A possible explanation of the findings in the present study could be provided by several variables, such as the high level of EFL skills exhibited by Norwegian EFL learners (Busby, 2018). Arguably, the participants are aware of the differences between AmE and BrE due to their substantial out-of-classroom exposure to these varieties via travel, mass media, computer games, English-medium social websites, etc. Given that the participants and EFL learners in Norway in general are exposed to authentic AmE and BrE input on a daily basis, they are presumably aware of the differences between these two major varieties and are eager to use one variety consistently. Consequently, when the participants encounter a word in AmE in their otherwise BrE, they treat this word as a PDW. Another variable consists in the approach to EFL teaching and learning in Norway, which is characterised by EFL learners' freedom to choose their preferred variety of English and, concurrently, by the EFL teachers' liberty to conduct lessons in their preferred Inner Circle variety of English (Rindal, 2014). Arguably, the freedom to choose one's variety of English, typically an Inner Circle variety such as AmE or BrE, feeds into EFL learners' awareness of the differences among the varieties and maps onto their choice of variety. It is inferred from the participants' comments that they try to use their preferred varieties of English, e.g. BrE, consistently, hence any deviation from the consistent use is regarded by the participants as a PDW. Another possible explanation of these PDWs could involve two aspects that exert their influence simultaneously on the participants, namely the influence of AmE on aural perception as well as the interference of the spelling, i.e. visual perception.

[2.4.6] Diphthongs instead of monophthongs due to similarities in form as a cause of PDWs

The analysis of the participants' comments and reflections upon PDWs indicates that 11% of them seem to associate the causes of PDWs with the morphological similarities between a PDW and a cognate word. The participants argue that some PDWs seem to resemble morphologically similar words that are pronounced differently, for instance *accountable*, *certificate*, *comfortable*, *knowledge*, *confederate*, *preface*, *surface*, *turkey*, *valuable* and *vegetables*. Typically, the participants comment upon the aforementioned PDWs as problematic to pronounce due to their resemblance to a cognate. For instance, Participant P2 refers to the PDW *preface* by commenting that "I used to pronounce it [pri:feɪs], and I believe this comes from word separation and composite word rules in Norwegian interfering with my understanding of the English pronunciation" (Participant P 2). These findings are in line with those of Szczyra-Kozłowska (2011), who observes an analogous phenomenon in her corpus of PDWs. Szczyra-Kozłowska (2011) notes that alternating forms due to similarities in morphology cause substantial problems to Polish L1 intermediate EFL learners. Judging from these findings, it is possible to assume that similarities in the form of the words, and particularly word morphology, could be a source of pronunciation difficulties irrespective of the EFL learners' L1s. Obviously, more empirical studies are needed to verify this assumption.

[2.4.7] Long words as a cause of PDWs

As reported by 11% of participants, long words appear to cause problems with the pronunciation of PDWs such as *compartmentalisation*, *dispensation*, *earthquake*, *fire extinguisher*, *obliterated*, and *strangeness*. Whilst the participants subjectively perceive the aforementioned PDWs as long, there are disyllabic words among them, such as *earthquake* and *strangeness*. Specifically, the participants regard the disyllabic PDWs *earthquake* and *strangeness* as long words and point to the length of the word as a cause of the pronunciation difficulties. These findings are in agreement with those of Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who uses the term “longer words” in this context. In the present study, the participants’ view of long words as a source of pronunciation difficulty could be accounted for by the relatively low frequency of the aforementioned words. Several participants indicated that they rarely use polysyllabic words and tend to use monosyllabic and/or disyllabic words. Presumably, the participants’ predominant use of monosyllabic words in their oral communication in English is concomitant with the difficulties that they experience with the so-called “longer words” in the sense posited by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011). Obviously, it is beyond the scope of the present paper to expand upon this assumption, since more participants and more studies would be needed in order to do so.

[2.4.8] Less frequent causes of PDWs: the co-presence of [l] + [r], false friends, and the absence of the short vowel sound [ʌ] in Norwegian

The cause of PDWs that is associated with the combination and co-presence of [l] + [r] is reported by one participant (5.5% of all participants) in the PDWs *particularly*, *rarely*, and *regularly*. These PDWs are not frequent in the corpus ($N = 1$). Concerning the co-presence of [l] + [r] in a PDW, one of the participants indicates that such PDWs as *regularly*, *particularly* and *rarely* are associated with difficulties, since “I have always known that I struggle with these types of words as pronouncing them always demanded quite the effort and concentration from my side” (Participant P 11). This finding supports the study conducted by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), who suggests that liquids are perceived as a problem by intermediate EFL learners. In contrast to Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011), however, the co-presence of the liquids [l] + [r] in this study is not substantial. It might be associated with the individual characteristics of the participant.

Arguably, an individual participant’s characteristics might be involved in those PDWs whose cause is listed by another participant (5.5% of the whole group) as the absence of the short vowel sound [ʌ] in Norwegian. According to the participant, the absence of [ʌ] makes it difficult for him to pronounce the PDWs *country* ($N = 1$) and *crunched* ($N = 1$). The participant notes that instead of the English short vowel [ʌ] in these PDWs he employs the Norwegian vowel sound [ø].

Among other less frequent causes of PDWs, one participant (5.5% of the whole group) points to false friends in the PDWs *generation* ($N = 1$), *radar* ($N = 1$) and *torture* ($N = 1$). The participant argues that the similarities in spelling between those English

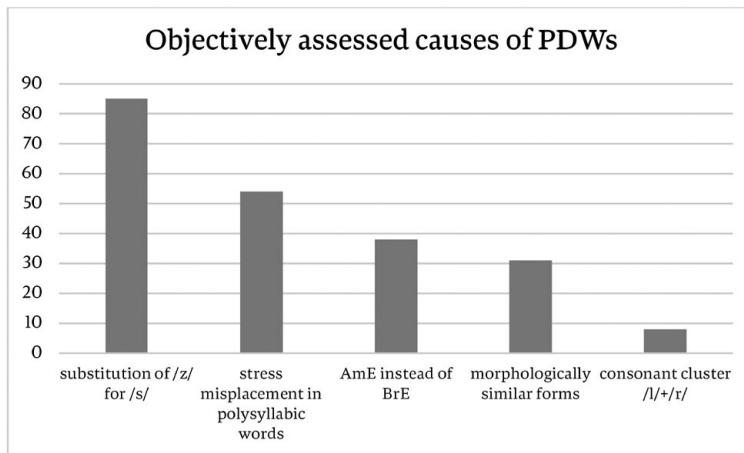
words and their Norwegian equivalents exacerbate her pronunciation of those PDWs. Whereas false friends (e.g. *generation*, *radar*, and *torture*) are mentioned by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) as a significant variable, the present findings are suggestive of the epiphenomenal role of false friends in the PDWs in this corpus.

[2.5] The post-hoc procedure

Whereas the necessity of conducting a post-hoc analysis is mentioned by Szpyra-Kozłowska (2011) as an avenue to explore in further studies, there is no explicit post-hoc procedure in her 2011 investigation. The present study, however, seeks to follow Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2011) desideratum concerning an objective assessment of PDWs by conducting a post-hoc procedure. The post-hoc examination of the participants' PDWs in this study involved the following steps. Following the participants' submission of their lists of PDWs and the accompanying comments and reflections, the participants were requested by me to read aloud and record the complete list of PDWs, which consists of all items mentioned by the participants in their individual lists of PDWs (see Table 2). However, the participants were presented only with the types and not the tokens of the PDWs. Additionally, the participants were not provided with the frequencies of the PDWs. Instead, they were given the list of PDWs from Table 2 (in alphabetical order without the frequency of occurrence) to be read and recorded at home at any time convenient for them. The participants were asked to send the audio files with the read-alouds of PDWs to me. In total, 13 out of 18 participants provided the audio files. The participants' read-alouds were assessed by the author of the article and another linguist who serves on the university EFL examination board.

The objective assessment of the participants' read-alouds yielded the following findings. The major cause of PDWs was identified as the mispronunciation of the English consonant sound [z] by 85% of those participants who submitted the audio files with the read-alouds. Another substantial cause of PDWs is associated with incorrect stress placement in polysyllabic PDWs by 54% of the participants. In addition to the aforementioned causes of difficulties, the objective assessment revealed that 38% of the participants employed AmE pronunciation in several PDWs, whereas they normally used BrE, and 31% of the participants mispronounced PDWs due to morphologically similar forms. Finally, a minor cause of PDWs involves the consonant cluster [l]+[r], which posed difficulties to 8% of the participants. These findings are illustrated by Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Objectively Assessed Causes of PDWs in the Post-Hoc Procedure



It is seen in Figure 2 that the major causes of PDWs (which account for more than 50% of all cases of PDWs) appear to be attributed to the English consonant sound [z] (85%) and the word stress misplacement in polysyllabic PDWs (54%). Let us discuss these cases in more detail. Those PDWs that are associated with the English consonant sound [z] seem to be caused by the participants' mispronunciation of [z] in the word-initial, word-final, and mid-word positions, as seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The PDWs that are Caused by the Mispronunciation of [z]

N	PDWs with [z] and morpho-syntactic characteristics	PDWs
1	-s in plural nouns	<i>Americans, benches, boys, buzz, doors, ears, eyes, eaves, gins, graves, hands, his, Italians, mountains, names, nickers, pins, representatives, ridges, seventies, shoes, stairs, words</i>
2	-s in the 3 person singular verbs	<i>Contains</i>
3	-s/s-/s- in the stem of the word	<i>As, bemused, easel, his, nose, please, was, zero, zip, zoo</i>

It follows from Table 4 that the participants experienced difficulties with the pronunciation of [z] irrespective of its position in the word, for instance in the word-initial (*zoo*), word-final (*his*) and intervocalic positions (*easel*). It should be remembered that 67% of all participants self-assess the absence of the consonant sound [z] in the Norwegian language as a cause of pronunciation difficulties in English. The objective assessment, however, indicates that 85% of those participants who provided read-alouds typically substitute [s] for [z], which results in difficulties with the comprehension of English words. It could be argued that the participants' self-assessment of the difficulties posed by the English consonant sound [z] is further supported by the objective assessment outlined

in the present post-hoc procedure. Furthermore, both the subjective and objective forms of assessment indicate that the presence of the English voiced fricative [z] is associated with a persistent pronunciation difficulty on the part of the participants. Specifically, the English fricative [z] was self-assessed by the participants as problematic in the middle of the semester. By the end of the autumn semester, when the participants had sent in their read-alouds, the pronunciation of [z] by the participants continued to exhibit a tendency to be associated with problems.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that following the post-hoc procedure, the author of this article and the participants engaged in a classroom discussion during one of the seminars in English phonetics; the topic of the discussion was the participants' problems with the English [z] sound. During the discussion, the participants indicated that the position of the [z] sound in the PDWs did not influence their ability to discriminate between the [z] - [s] contrast in oral communication in English. Moreover, the participants reported that they experienced general challenges with aural discrimination between the English consonant sounds [s] and [z]. Presumably, these findings provide indirect support to the study conducted by Kuzumoto (2012), who suggests that the ability to hear the differences between minimal pairs in a foreign language is related to the ability to pronounce the minimal pair correctly.

Judging from the findings of the post-hoc procedure, another substantial cause of the participants' PDWs seems to be related to the misplacement of stress in polysyllabic words, as illustrated by Table 5.

Table 5. Stress in Polysyllabic Words as a Cause of PDWs

N	Syllabic Structure of PDWs	PDWs
1	Seven-syllable word	Compartmentalisation
2	Five-syllable word	Obliterated
3	Four-syllable word	Calligraphy, dispensation

As seen in Table 5, the objective assessment reveals that the participants experience problems with the word stress in those PDWs that are comprised of four and more syllables. The misplacement of the word stress in these PDWs is associated with the placement of the stress on the first syllable. Notably, this pattern could be considered to follow a typical stress placement in the Norwegian language (Rugesæter, 2014). The participants' tendency to stress the first syllable in a polysyllabic word (see Table 5 above) appears to result in unnecessary consonant omissions in the second and (especially) in the third syllables of polysyllabic PDWs. It could be argued that in terms of the stress misplacement in polysyllabic PDWs, negative transfer from Norwegian (the participants' L1) compromises the aural comprehension of those PDWs by the raters in the post-hoc procedure. These findings are in line with a number of recent studies that report a detrimental effect of stress misplacement as far as the intermediate EFL students' oral output is concerned (Cámará-Arenas, 2018; Jaiprasong & Pongpairoj, 2020; Nowacka,

2019). Notably, in their subjective self-assessment of PDWs, the participants do not refer to word stress as a source of pronunciation difficulties. Instead, they operate within the construal of the so-called “long word” and assign the cause of the difficulty to the word length in a polysyllabic word.

As far as the less common causes of PDWs are concerned, for instance the inconsistencies of usage associated with AmE in the participants’ BrE, the following should be noted. The American pronunciation of a number of lexical items by the participants who usually prefer and speak BrE is one of the inconclusive (and perhaps impressionistic) aspects of the analysis of PDWs. To illustrate this point, let us consider the PDW *words*, which is pronounced as AmE [wɜː:rdz] by several participants who would normally use BrE in their oral communication in English. The two raters in the post-hoc procedure, who are the author of the present article and a university lecturer in phonetics, indicate that it is unexpected to encounter the participants’ pronunciation of *words* as [wɜː:rdz] in AmE in a flow of speech that is produced in BrE. However, at the same time, the raters agree that from the vantage point of the intermediate level of EFL proficiency, the insertion of AmE pronunciation in the learners’ BrE speech output would not be classified as a significant pronunciation error. Presumably, such an inconsistency might be perceived as an oddity by English L1 speakers; however, at the same time it is likely not to be associated with pronunciation errors by EFL professionals. This observation suggests the need for a separate study that would involve English L1 speakers’ perceptions and ratings of lexical items produced by Norwegian L1 EFL learners.

A less frequent source of PDWs in the post-hoc procedure is related to the mispronunciation of the PDW *confederate* due to a morphologically similar form by 31% of those participants who submitted their read-alouds. Those participants who experience problems with this PDW mispronounce it as [kən'fedəreɪt] instead of [kən'fedərət], i.e. they appear to substitute the diphthong [eɪ] for the neutral vowel schwa [ə]. Presumably this substitution eventuates from the participants’ perception of *confederate* as a word whose constituent parts morphologically resemble the noun *rate* and/or the verb *to rate*, both of which are pronounced as [reɪt]. If this assumption is true, it might provide support to the prior study conducted by Nowacka (2018, p. 463), who indicates that the mispronunciation of suffixes, such as *-ate*, is related to the EFL learners’ misinterpretation of the constituent parts of the PDWs. Another possible explanation concerning the mispronunciation of *confederate* by 31% of the participants in the post-hoc procedure could be related to the combination of the morphological resemblance of the suffix *-ate* in *confederate* in conjunction with the possible visual input associated with the spelling of the words *a rate/to rate*.

As is evident from Figure 2, the least frequent source of PDWs is the presence of the consonant cluster [l] and [r]. It occurs in the read-aloud submitted by one participant (8%) out of 13. The objective assessment by the raters in the post-hoc procedure is indicative of the pattern of the participant’s mispronunciation of the PDWs *particularly* and *regularly*, which are mispronounced as [pə'tɪkjəli] instead of [pə'tɪkjələli], and ['regjʊəli] instead of ['regjʊləli]. Whilst liquids are generally considered by EFL learners

to be challenging to pronounce (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2011), the present data are suggestive of the individual speech characteristics of one particular participant rather than indicating a group feature of Norwegian L1 EFL learners on the intermediate level of proficiency.

Summarising the results of the post-hoc procedure, it is possible to observe that the 13 participants who submitted the read-alouds do not experience problems with the short English vowel [ʌ], interdentals, [w] – [v] contrast, spelling, and false friends. These findings could be explained by the following two variables. First, not all participants submitted the read-alouds in the post-hoc procedure. Consequently, the decrease in the number and types of errors associated with the PDWs could be accounted for by the less representative number of participants. Second, the participants submitted their read-alouds closer to the end of the semester, approximately one month after the main experimental procedure. During the time between the experiment and the post-hoc procedure, they gained substantial teaching and learning exposure to the peculiarities of English pronunciation as part of the course in English phonetics. Presumably, practice effects that the participants experienced during the course in English phonetics facilitated their awareness of the problematic areas of English pronunciation, subsequently resulting in fewer pronunciation errors and fewer PDWs.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the post-hoc procedure is as follows. It appears that the participants' self-assessment of the causes of PDWs is partially in accordance with the objective assessment in the post-hoc procedure. In particular, the following causes of PDWs are found both in self-assessment and objective assessment: i) the substitution of [s] for [z], ii) the use of AmE instead of BrE, iii) morphologically similar forms, and iv) the consonant cluster [l]+[r]. Based upon these findings, it seems feasible to suggest that self-assessment as a judgment of the participants' performance in the sense posited by Raaijmakers et al. (2019) is a useful technique for providing self-evaluation of participants' current performance, as argued by Kissling and O'Donnell (2015). At the same time, however, it seems reasonable to agree with Strachan, Kennedy, and Trofimovich (2019), who indicate that EFL learners' self-assessment of their own speech problems might be inflated and not completely reliable. For instance, the results of the subjective self-assessment point to the minimal pair [w] – [v] as a source of PDWs, whereas according to the objective assessment this appears not to be the case. Similarly, whereas the participants ascribe the cause of PDWs to the "long words" (i.e. polysyllabic words), the actual cause of certain PDWs is found by the post-hoc analysis to be associated with stress placement. Hence, a cautious approach is needed that combines self-assessment data with an objective analysis of the causes of PDWs.

[3] Conclusions and linguo-didactic implications

The study presented and discussed in this article aimed at identifying a range of PDWs in oral discourse in English by a group of participants who were requested to provide self-

-assessment of PDWs and comments associated with the causes of those PDWs. The results of the data analysis reveal that the participants tend to attribute the causes of PDWs in their oral discourse in English to the absence of certain English sounds in Norwegian, their L1. In particular, the participants refer to the absence of the English consonant sounds [z], [θ], [ð] and [w] in the Norwegian language as one of the main sources of pronunciation difficulties in their speech in English. Other substantial sources of PDWs in the participants' oral discourse in English are associated with the system of English spelling, as well as the occasional use of American pronunciation in the participants' oral output in English (which is normally produced by them in the British variety of the English language).

With regard to linguo-didactic implications, the following could be concluded. First, there appears to be a need to compile a list of PDWs that are reflective of Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners' difficulties with English pronunciation. Second, EFL teachers should be made aware of a set of PDWs that might be problematic for intermediate EFL learners to pronounce. Third, in EFL teaching and learning in Norwegian contexts, special attention should be given to the segmentals that are absent in the learners' L1, Norwegian. Specifically, attention should be awarded to the teaching and learning of the English fricative [z], which presents a substantial and recurring difficulty to Norwegian L1 EFL learners. Fourth, special emphasis should be placed upon the teaching and learning of stress patterns in English. Moreover, contrastive points between word stress in English and Norwegian should be consistently taught in courses of English phonetics offered to Norwegian L1 intermediate EFL learners. Lastly, Norwegian L1 EFL learners should be reminded to use only one variety of the English language instead of mixing the varieties of English in their oral output. In addition to the above-mentioned linguo-didactic suggestions, further studies should be conducted in order to provide a deeper insight into PDWs that pose problems to intermediate EFL learners whose L1 is Norwegian.

[Acknowledgements]

The author of the article wishes to acknowledge the participants' invaluable input. The author is appreciative of the editor and the two anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions are highly appreciated.

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