ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION TRAINING THROUGH THE EYES OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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Abstract
The aim of the current study is to examine the program of pronunciation training and its implementation from a new perspective, which is that of MA graduates. The data were obtained from 65 graduates of the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań by means of an online survey. The research questions posed in the study explore the matter of taught models and varieties of English, materials, teaching, and opinions regarding the accent the participants received. By providing a new perspective on the teaching and learning of pronunciation the study might help university teachers to enhance the pronunciation courses in their institutions.

Keywords: phonetics, training, survey, pronunciation, graduates

1. Introduction

English pronunciation teaching and learning has constituted the subject of numerous studies conducted among students and teachers from Polish and international perspectives. These studies, usually adopting the form of a survey, have explored such aspects as the perception of learners' own pronunciation, teacher training, organisation of courses, application of pronunciation models, and the approaches to them. The authors decided to take a new approach to survey methodology, prompted by John M. Levis's statement that "[…] teaching-related research questions are important, but the studies that examine them are few and far between" (2016:1).

The attitudes of Polish teachers of English towards pronunciation courses they had taught have been researched both in the context of secondary education (Szpyra-Kozłowska et al. 2002, Wrembel 2002), and tertiary education (Wysocka 2003, Henderson et al. 2015). Szpyra-Kozłowska et al. (2002) addressed the issue

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of attention given to particular aspects of English pronunciation at various levels of proficiency, and concluded that secondary education teachers predominantly train suprasegmental features, such as intonation or word-stress. Wrembel (2002) investigated the phonological meta-knowledge of Polish teachers of English at the secondary level, including their self-awareness and teaching strategies, as well as inquired about the focus of pronunciation training. According to this study segmental phonetics seems to receive more attention in the teaching process. Wysocka (2003), in turn, overviewed the materials used during English pronunciation training at the university level, as well as pronunciation teaching methodology. Henderson et al. (2015) conducted a study among teachers from seven European countries, which included 640 respondents, of whom 20 were Polish. The focal aspects of the survey were the accent models used by English teachers, pronunciation training the teachers had received, teaching methods and materials, course organisation, as well as the input their students receive outside the classroom.

The studies investigating students' attitudes towards pronunciation courses researched issues such as the perception of models and accents (Janicka et al. 2005, Waniek-Klimczak et al. 2015, or the controversial 'Polglish' and the legitimacy of its use (Janicka et al. 2005, Waniek-Klimczak et al. 2015). As for the attitudes towards various accents, Janicka et al. (2005) showed that American English is perceived as more "relaxed', 'business-like', and 'neutral', although also 'primitive' and 'careless, while British English is thought to be 'unspoilt', 'academic', 'clear', 'classy', and 'charismatic', albeit 'ridiculous', 'stiff', and 'old-fashioned'. In the international arena, the matter of attitudes towards accents was investigated by Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999) and revealed that among Spanish and Basque students of English, the attitude towards RP, although on a positive side of the spectrum, is not as good as towards other British accents, although still better than in the case of Irish or American accents. As far as learners' approach towards replicating and maintaining the acquired accent model is concerned, Waniek Klimczak et al. (2015) concluded that although students at the BA level are very concerned about speaking 'properly' and with a standard accent, the more they progress, the less orthodox they become, which results in their adapting a more non-standard accent.

The previous studies overviewed in the paragraphs above have surveyed to either students or teachers. In order to extend the scope of investigations and propose a new research perspective, the present study aims at tapping into the opinions of English studies graduates regarding their pronunciation course, and the application of the acquired skills outside the university. This group's unique perspective stems from the fact that they are in what was recognised by the authors as a 'transition period', namely, they are just establishing their professional careers and have a perspective necessary to evaluate the skills acquired during tertiary education. This previously underresearched perspective may provide a novel insight into pronunciation teaching and learning, as well as its practical application in life outside academia.

2. Study

2.1. Background

The course of English pronunciation at the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań at the undergraduate level encompasses 120h of classes during the first year, and 60h of classes during the second year of studies. The students of the first year select one of the accents offered at the Faculty of English, namely, Standard British or General American. Pronunciation training in one of the selected accents includes segmental features (in the 1st year of their BA studies), and suprasegmental features (in the 2nd year BA). Furthermore, during the MA studies students may participate in a non-mandatory course of remedial phonetics (60 h). According to the curriculum, such an intensive training is intended to provide the students with the foundations for the development of native-like pronunciation in one of the selected accents, which is the ultimate goal of the course.

The research questions posed in the study with respect to the organisational structure of the pronunciation course and the profile of the participants were as follows:

1. Were the pronunciation models taught at the Faculty of English consistent with the expectations of students?
2. How do the participants evaluate the materials and techniques used during the course?
3. How do the graduates evaluate the practical implementation of the model?
4. Would they prefer to be exposed more to different varieties of English?
5. Do the participants feel motivated to maintain the acquired accent after graduation?

The answers to the research questions were embedded in an online questionnaire, which is described in detail in the subsequent section.

2.2. Questionnaire

The data were collected via an online, anonymous questionnaire devised by means of Google Forms. The structure of the questionnaire, the choice of rating scale and the formulation of questions was based on the guidelines for questionnaires and surveys provided by Mitchell and Jolley (2013: 275-330), Balnaves and Caputi (2001), and Cresswell (2012). Two independent testers ensured the face validity of the questionnaire prior to its administration to the target group. The questionnaire consisted of 35 questions; the participants were requested to provide bio data (gender, age, country of origin, country of current residence, year of graduation, information whether they completed their BA at the Faculty of English, AMU) before proceeding to the main core questions. The

research questions suggested 5 leading themes, namely, models, materials, implementation, varieties, and reflections, according to which the blocks of questions were organised. The majority of the questions required ordinal scale rating (1–7 scale; 1 – absence of value/negative attitude, 7 – maximal value/positive attitude). The remaining questions were based on multiple selection or allowed open answers. The time necessary for the completion of the questionnaire was approximately 15 minutes. The survey attracted a total of 69 responses, 65 out of whom were included in the analysis. Four answers were excluded from the analysis in order to preserve the homogeneity of the group, as these answers were provided by non-recent graduates.

2.3. Participants

65 recent graduates of the Faculty of English in Poznań (mean age=26.5, SD=1.5; male to female ratio: 19:46) took part in the study. The participants earned their MA degree between 2012 and 2016, with the majority graduating in 2015. The Faculty of English students of these years received pronunciation training based on a uniform curriculum. During their studies, 49 participants were taught Standard British pronunciation, whereas 16 were trained in General American pronunciation. At the time of answering the survey the majority of the participants resided in Poland (95.4%). The frequency of use of the English language after graduation amounts to M=5.81 (SD=1.4, Mo=4) in professional context, and M=4.3 (SD=1.3, Mo=4) in private context (on a 1–7 frequency scale; 1 – never, 7 – always).

3. Results

The results are discussed in five sections corresponding to the main thematic parts of the survey, that is models, materials, implementation, varieties, and reflections.

3.1. Models

At the beginning of the first year of BA studies, the new students of the Faculty of English are required to choose the accent in which they are going to be trained during the pronunciation classes. The available options are Standard British and General American.

When asked about their familiarity with the accent of their choice prior to university training, participants rated it as M=3.2 (1 – not at all familiar, 7 – very familiar). The dominant answer (Mo=2) and the amount of variation in the responses (SD=1.5) allows the assumption that having left high school, the majority of the respondents had a very vague concept of features these accents actually entail. Unspecified as their expectations might have been, the majority of the respondents stated that the pronunciation course they had received, provided

the anticipated speech model (M=5.25, Mo=6, SD=1.3, 1 – not at all, 7 – definitely yes). Moreover, the participants stated that if they were to choose an accent again, they would, on average, make the same choice (M=5.5 Mo=7, SD=2.1, 1 – not at all, 7 – definitely yes).

The question of particular interest to the authors of this paper related to the models implemented during the pronunciation course. Currently, students are trained in standardised accents, recognised under the labels 'General British' and 'General American'. The question that remains concerns the type of model graduates perceive as the one they should be taught. The standardised accents taught at the Faculty of English tend to evoke certain feelings and attitudes (see Reflections), and possibly may have an effect on one's linguistic production. Therefore, the participants were asked which accent should be taught to students of English as a foreign language. The 'standard' option based on a variety of pronunciation teaching materials, currently taught at the Faculty, was selected by 27% of the respondents. As many as 60.3% of the answers pointed to a model based on some authentic materials, rather than on resources created specifically for teaching purposes. On the one hand, the preference for models based on authentic materials may suggest that the respondents are aware of the differences between a standardised accent and the pronunciation of the native speakers of English. On the other hand, such a result poses a problem regarding the choice of the model for teaching. There are as many varieties of English as there are speakers, and implementation of such a favoured, authentic model would still require a certain amount of selection and standardisation. Consequently, the may be achieved by both considering the opinions of graduates, as well as adopting some realistic measures while devising a model for teaching.

3.2. Materials

The course syllabus specifies the goals and requirements, as well as provides references to materials used during the course in pronunciation. However, these guidelines and materials constitute just a part of the materials used during pronunciation classes. Therefore, in the following section of the questionnaire the participants were requested to define and evaluate the materials used by their pronunciation teachers.

In the first question, the respondents were asked to recall the materials used during the two years of training. The format used for this item was an open list question. The material mentioned most frequently (by 58.5% of the respondents) was Say It Right[1], a multimedia software developed at the Faculty of English in Poznań, followed by How Now Brown Cow[2] (mentioned by 36.9% of the

[1] Sawala, Krzysztof, Szczegóła, Tomasz, Jankowski, Michał, Weckwerth, Jarosław. 2009-2015. *Say It Right – Multimedialny Kurs Wymowy i Słownictwa Angielskiego.* Poznań: SuperMemoWorld – Oficyna Wydawnicza Atena.

[2] Ponsonby, Mimi. 1982. *How Now, Brown Cow*? Oxford; New York: Pergamon Press.

respondents). Resources including a variety of textbooks, BBC-devised materials, as well as 'YouTube' or 'TV' achieved single digit scores. Moreover, the participants were requested to order the materials in terms of their efficiency. Figure 1 presents the percentages of respondents listing a given material as the first choice in terms of its efficiency. Due to the natural constraints on the respondents' memory and the effect of frequency, such a distribution may also to some extent reflect the frequency of use of the materials listed by the participants.

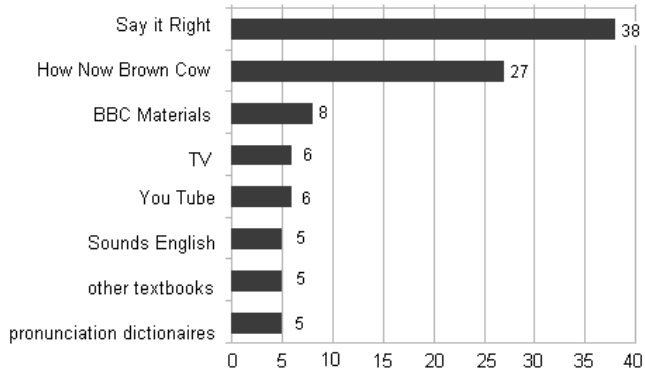

Figure 1. Most efficient materials according to the respondents of the study (in percentages of respondents ordering a given material as the first position on the list).

The participants were also requested to evaluate the materials they encountered during the course in terms of how varied and up to date they were. The results indicate an above-average level of satisfaction with the variety of materials (M=4.6; Mo=5, SD=1.3, 1 – definitely not enough variety, 7 – definitely enough variety). As for keeping up to date with the changes in English pronunciation, the same materials were rated as average (M=4.1; Mo=5, SD=1.6, 1 – not at all up to date, 7 – very up to date). Such an average result may be attributed to the fact that modern and technologically advanced resources such as Say It Right, were counterbalanced by more dated materials, such as How Now Brown Cow.

3.3. Implementation

This section predominantly concerns such issues as the focus of the pronunciation course and teacher qualifications. In the first question, the respondents were asked to evaluate the focus on particular aspects of pronunciation, namely vowels, consonants, and intonation (on a 7-point scale; 1 – far too little, 7 – far too much). The responses revealed that a sufficient amount of attention was devoted to segmental features (vowels: M=4.3, Mo=4, SD=1.3 consonants: M=4.3, Mo=4, SD=1). Intonation, however, was deemed to be an aspect that should require further training (M=3.2, Mo=3, SD=1.3). Such responses reflect the organisation

of the pronunciation course, which favours segmentals in terms of the instruction time devoted to training. On the other hand, they may be related to more universal challenges inherent to teaching intonation in the EFL classroom. In the subsequent question, the participants were requested to evaluate the extent to which the course focused on phonetic changes in the English language (1 – insufficient, 7 – definitely sufficient). The answers reflected a necessity for a more thorough instruction regarding this issue (M=3.8, Mo=3, SD=1.7). The participants were also asked to rate the relevance of the selected qualities of a pronunciation teacher (1 – irrelevant, 7 – most relevant). The features subjected to rating included teaching experience, metaphonetic and phonological knowledge as well as age proximity to learners. The last aspect was related to the ability to provide an age-matched model and was introduced as a result of discussions among staff members at The Faculty of English. The most relevant quality, in the eyes of the graduates, was metaknowledge (M=5.75, Mo=6, SD=1.3), followed closely by teaching experience (M=5.5, Mo=5, SD=1.1). The teacher vs. learners' age proximity (M=2.9, Mo=1, SD=1.8) was rated as irrelevant.

3.4. Varieties

The significance of training related to the varieties of spoken English constituted a theme of the subsequent module of questions. The graduates were requested to rate their exposure to the varieties of English beyond the taught models during their pronunciation course. The results suggest a below-average exposure to other varieties of English during the classes (M=3.0, Mo=3, SD=1.2) – no exposure, 7 – too frequent exposure). Consequently, the participants were asked whether it is necessary to extend the scope of exposure to the varieties of English beyond the selected models. The answers revealed that the graduates would have considered the exposure to other varieties as a valuable addition to the course (M=5.9, Mo=7, SD=1.5, 1 – definitely no, 7 – definitely yes). The last question of the module concerned the level of familiarity with the varieties of English. The graduates were presented with a list of selected varieties, and requested to rate their familiarity with each of them. The results are presented in a bar chart (Figure 2).

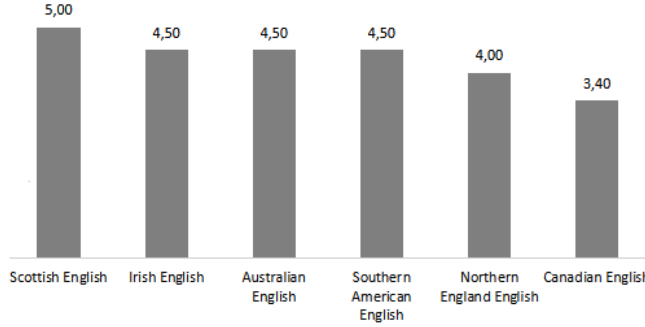

Figure 2. Participants' familiarity with the varieties of English (mean scores).

Despite the expressed necessity for a greater amount of exposure to different varieties of English, the results revealed that the respondents declare a certain amount of knowledge in this respect. The majority of the respondents would be able to recognise such varieties as Scottish English (M=5.0, Mo=7, SD=1.7), which was closely followed by Irish English (M=4.5, Mo=5, SD=1.9). Australian English (M=4.5, Mo=3, SD=1.8) and Southern American English (M=4.5, Mo=7, SD=2.2) received mean scores which indicated an above average familiarity, however they differed greatly in terms of the distribution of the responses. The graduates declared that they possessed an average concept of the Northern England English accent (M=4.0, Mo=4, SD=1.9). As for Canadian English, the participants rated their familiarity with the accent somewhat below average (M=3.4, Mo=2, SD=1.9).

The authors of the study suppose that the reason for such results is exposure to the respective accents, not only in the classroom, but also in the media. Another reason could be their lack of the ability to distinguish particular accents, such as Scottish from Irish or Northern England English, or Southern America English from General American. Students' chosen accents often reflect their cultural interests, and therefore General American-speaking graduates may not have been exposed to the variety of British accents and Standard British-speaking graduates might not have received enough exposure to the variety of American accents. When separated into groups on the basis of accent choice, the respondents who selected the General American accent less frequently expressed their familiarity with Scottish English (Mo=5) and Northern England English (Mo=2) than the participants who selected the Standard British accent (Mo=7 for Scottish English and Mo=5 for Northern England English).

3.5. Reflections

The final part of the questionnaire contained the overall reflections of the participants regarding their English pronunciation. After graduating from university, they may find themselves in situations which test the applicability of the acquired model, as well as observe the direction towards which their pronunciation could be heading in terms of further accent maintenance or deterioration.

The following part of the study constitutes an inquiry into the post-graduation dynamics of pronunciation. The participants were asked whether they like their current accent. The results revealed a significant level of satisfaction with their English accents (M=5.0, Mo=6, SD=1.5, 1 - not at all, 7 - definitely yes). In response to requests to rate their confidence in producing English segmentals and suprasegmentals (1 – not confident at all, 7 – very confident), the graduates ascribed a greater amount to the former (M=5.3, Mo=6, SD=1.4). The latter category is characterised by a slightly lesser amount of confidence in production (M=4.6, Mo=5, SD=1.5). Such a disparity between the two scores to some extent corresponds to the results obtained in the Implementation section regarding the amount of attention these aspects of pronunciation received during classes.

The graduates participating in the study also answered a question regarding their further work on maintaining or improving their accent. As many as 58.5% of the respondents declared that they continue to work on their pronunciation. The graduates stated that their practice involved mainly Say It Right drilling exercises and listening.

The subsequent question inquired about the occurrences of ‘accent switch’, namely situations in which the graduates consciously drop the accent acquired at the university and switch to a less native-like pronunciation. When asked about frequency of such switches, the average score for the respondents amounted to M=3.9 (Mo=5, SD=1.9, 1 – never, 7 – always). It can therefore be concluded that the graduates do not maintain the acquired accent every time they use English. They pointed to the following factors which determine the switch: intelligibility when talking to non-fluent EFL speakers, or interlocutor accommodation, when talking to native speakers of other accents (31% of the participants), social perception of their accent (17%), or minimisation of the effort. Those who named intelligibility as a reason for the accent switch provided a further motivation for such a change, namely that the acquired English native-like accent is not comprehensible to individual learners at the lower levels of proficiency. The social perception basis to accent switch was provided mainly by graduates who acquired Standard British pronunciation. Some of them added that their accent was perceived as “showing off” or posh, which prompted them to switch.

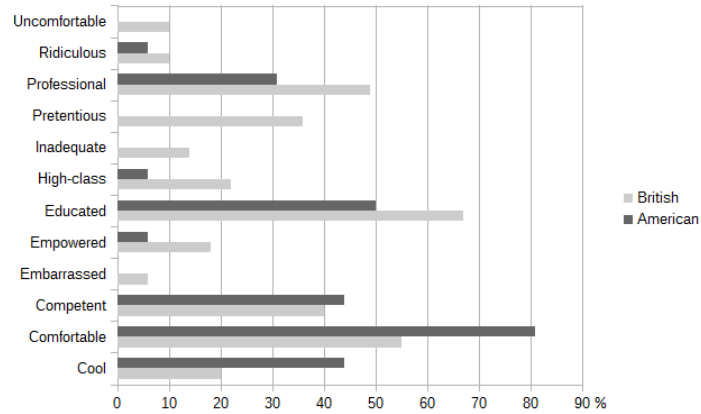

Figure 3. The perception of respondents' own accent ('How do you feel speaking your accent?') in percentages per each answer.

The next question in this part of the questionnaire was intended to reflect the feelings and attitudes evoked during speaking in a given accent. The results of the American-accented respondents are compared with the British-accented respondents, in order to reflect certain accent-specific tendencies. The details are presented in a bar chart (see Figure 3) where British-accented results are marked with light gray, and American-accented ones with dark gray. In order to enable the comparison of the data, the raw number results were divided by the number of participants speaking in the respective accent. Consequently, each bar shows the percentage of the accent's speakers (in the study) that decided to select that option in a multiple selection task. Interestingly, although a larger share of British speakers feel educated or professional, the same speakers dominate in the majority of negative labels, such as 'pretentious', 'ridiculous'. The speakers of American accent dominated in the responses associating their accent with labels such as 'cool', 'comfortable', or 'competent'. However, the study does not determine whether such results stem from the general perception of the accent, or the participants' pronunciation exclusively.

The last question posed in the section inquired about the feedback the participants receive from their interlocutors regarding their accent. The answers to this open question were organised according to the keywords presented in Table 1. 17 respondents received positive comments on their accent (including good, nice, etc.), 12 participants were labelled as sounding 'native-like', while six were described as more proper than native-speakers. Four respondents were viewed as showing off or posh, three received a comment that they did not sound English, and an additional two participants were thought to be non-native speakers of English but of a different mother tongue than Polish (Irish and Scandinavian). Two graduates received comments that their accent was impressive (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comments graduates received about their accent

Comment regarding the accent	No. of comments
positive	17
native-like	12
more proper than native	6
posh/showing off	4
non-Polish	3
foreign	2
impressive	2

4. Discussion

Research Question 1 inquired whether the pronunciation models taught at the Faculty of English were consistent with the expectations of the students. It appears that the expectations of the graduates, despite their vague pre-course model familiarity, were met by the course (M=5.25, Mo=6, SD=1.3). Such a result implies an overall satisfaction with the presented model. Research Question 2 enquired about the quality of materials and strategies used in the process of pronunciation training. The variety of materials was assessed as being slightly above average. The resources used during classes were rated as relatively recent. Say It Right, a drilling software, was rated as the most effective resource. As for Research Question 3, which investigated the graduates' opinion regarding the implementation of models and pronunciation classes in general, it was revealed that the participants prefer authentic models and resources rather than those tailored specifically for learning purposes. Such views oppose the adherence to strict RP reported as prevalent among Polish academic teachers (Henderson et al. 2015). However, this result seems to constitute an extension of the trend visible in Waniek-Klimczak et al. (2015), according to which undergraduate students tend to prefer standardised models, such as General American or RP, but at the MA level they appear to divert from these models in favour of less uniform accents.

Another aspect of the questionnaire is the emphasis put on certain elements of pronunciation. The results showed that the focus on segmental phonetics is more than sufficient, while suprasegmental features could receive more attention. Such findings may be compared to the data regarding the focus on particular aspects of pronunciation gathered among school teachers. The results of the present study appear to be in line with Wrembel (2002), who requested primary and secondary school teachers to provide a list of aspects constituting the main focus of pronunciation instruction. However, they contradict the findings of Szpyra-

Kozłowska et al. (2002), who state that intonation and word stress receive the most attention in schools.

As for the valued qualities of pronunciation teachers, expertise in the field of phonetics, and general teaching experience heavily outweigh the question of the teacher's age matching the age of students, i.e., the age-related model. The fact that metacompetence was rated as the most important factor of a pronunciation teacher is slightly divergent from the self-rating of teachers as reported by Wrembel (2002), who on average rated their own expertise in English pronunciation at a mere 3 on a 1–5 point scale. Therefore, the results might suggest that regardless of the level of education at which they work, teachers could be required to be equipped with better theoretical knowledge in the scope of phonetics.

Research Question 4 addresses the issue of the exposure to more varieties of English rather than just Standard British or General American. The respondents expressed the desire to have been made aware of a wider repertoire of English accents than they were during their pronunciation training. Research Question 5 revealed that the graduates view their English pronunciation in a favourable light, and keep working on their accent. They do notice, however, the necessity to perform an accent switch to a less native-like (and more 'Polglish') under certain circumstances. This is contrary to the findings of Henderson et al. (2015), who state that 100% of the Polish teachers who participated in their survey declare a strong preference for RP in productive and receptive work. There is therefore a discrepancy between the expectations of teachers and the choices of their former students.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed at offering new insights into the opinions of recent English studies' graduates regarding their pronunciation course. By reaching out to a demographics which was not examined in the previous surveys, the present study provided a new perspective on English pronunciation teaching and learning in the academic context. The collected data can be considered from a micro and macro perspective. On the micro level, the questionnaire contributed to an evaluation of the pronunciation course at the Faculty of English, AMU, Poznań. The results revealed that the graduates positively assess the English pronunciation course with respect to its implementation and applied materials (see the description of the course in the background section). Within the macro perspective, the study highlighted the attitudes of recent graduates towards English pronunciation, and its role in their lives outside academia. The graduates revealed a rather liberal standpoint regarding accents models and non-native pronunciation. The accent model which attracted the majority of responses was the one described as 'based on authentic materials'. Such a choice implies that the participants are in favour of a model departing from the strict criteria of

standardisation. Moreover, the participants were in favour of providing more accent diversity in teaching materials, simultaneously expressing the need for familiarisation with different varieties of English. Additionally, the respondents revealed an open attitude towards the so-called 'Poglish' accent, which is marked with a certain amount of L1 interference. Such an openness to linguistic diversity might have been developed as a result of the experiences in different environments outside the pronunciation classroom. Not only did the graduates encounter a variety of English accents and recognise the value of a more inclusive approach to language, but they also realise that L1-marked varieties may constitute a tool facilitating communication with less proficient users of English.

6. Limitations and further directions

The authors of the study are aware that research in the form of a survey has certain limitations. Firstly, the respondents of the survey are limited by their own memory, knowledge and perception of self. The responses are subjected to the influence of the people who affected their relevant knowledge, that is teachers or other students.

Secondly, there are certain aspects of the participants' experience for which the authors did not take into account, and which some readers might find relevant to the results of the study, namely the current professional status of the respondents. Without such details, the results might not give a full picture of language usage, which in turn could affect the answers to some of the questions. Furthermore, as the pronunciation course is taught by many different teachers, the state of knowledge of specific graduates might differ. The authors attempted to account for the variation in the responses by providing mode and standard deviation scores next to each mean result.

Finally, the authors have been made aware of the specific context of the study, in particular the unusually vast amount of training the participants of our study had received. Although this is the standard at the Faculty of English, AMU, the authors do realise that not every English department puts such an emphasis on pronunciation training. However, the results of this research could still be interesting and relevant to pronunciation teachers in other institutions, particularly due to the sociolinguistic aspect of the study (attitudes towards accents) and the applicability of pronunciation training in the job market.

This study by no means exhausts the subject of pronunciation research among university alumni. Further studies of attitudes towards pronunciation may include reaching out to university graduates of other institutions in order to gain a wider perspective on English pronunciation teaching and learning in the academic context. Moreover, future studies may explore current backgrounds of graduates (e.g., profession, the contexts of the current use of English) in order to relate the evaluation of pronunciation training and the expectations of the people graduates meet in their professional lives.

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