

ACCENTS OF ENGLISH AT CZECH SCHOOLS: STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND RECOGNITION SKILLS

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Abstract

The study investigates the attitudes of 254 Czech students towards English as the main language taught at secondary schools. The questionnaire enquired about their perspectives on learning English in general, British and American cultures and accents of English. Such preferences may have implications for pronunciation model selection in TEFL. In addition, the participants evaluated 12 words pronounced in British or American English for pleasantness, and also assigned them to one of the varieties. Despite the predominance of American culture and despite equal distribution of cultural preferences and equal aesthetic evaluation of the accents, the British variety was marked as more prestigious and was also identified more successfully. Interestingly, the findings differed between students from the capital city and those from regional schools.

Keywords: Czech education, English, English accents, pronunciation, TEFL

1. Introduction

The acquisition of satisfactory pronunciation is a substantial component of mastering a second language (L2). A lower competence in pronunciation can for instance disturb the conversation flow by forcing the interlocutor to use more mental resources in processing the speech, reducing processing fluency (Munro and Derwing 1995; Dragojevic and Giles 2016). It has also been shown that foreign-accented speech has an effect on credibility of L2 learners in the perception of native listeners (Lev-Ari and Keysar 2010), as well as L2 listeners (Hanzlíková and Skarnitzl 2017). Moreover, non-native speakers with a strong foreign accent are more likely to be discriminated, for instance, in job interviews (Hosoda and Stone-Romero 2010) or service evaluations (Tombs and Rao Hill 2014). A remedy in such situations would be on the one hand raising listeners' tolerance towards foreign-accented speech and on the other hand improving speakers' pronunciation through detailed instruction provided to L2 learners.

The necessity of competent pronunciation guidance is relevant especially for English, as it is the language most widely used in international communication. While pronunciation instruction is strongly encouraged institutionally for example in the Common European Framework of Reference, and pronunciation evaluation is integrated into various English language exams, it still seems to be a neglected area in many English classes (Henderson et al. 2012). Secondary-school teachers should put sufficient emphasis on practising pronunciation, which is as important for successful communication as for instance acquiring grammar or vocabulary.

The English language exists in a wide range of pronunciation varieties (both native and non-native). In order to be able to communicate successfully with people of different varieties, learners should be exposed regularly to multiple accents. However, providing students with consistent pronunciation instruction requires one variety to be predominant in a single classroom. Moreover, it is unlikely that teachers would be able to use multiple accents equally while maintaining proficient pronunciation. Therefore, a fundamental decision which teachers of English as a foreign language must make pertains to which specific pronunciation model would be most appropriate for their students (see also Setter and Jenkins 2005; Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015).

With regard to English, the commonly considered options include Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA). RP, lately referred to also as Standard Southern British English, is the most prestigious and most widely understood British English variety used, for instance, in public media (Hughes, Trudgill and Watt 2012). GA is the most widespread variety of American English that “comprises that majority of American accents which do not show marked eastern or southern characteristics” (Wells 1982: 470). (See Kortmann and Upton 2008; Schneider 2008 for a discussion of the terms and “standard” accent choices.) Other native varieties were also suggested for a pronunciation model, e.g. Scottish English (Crystal 1995).

Furthermore, alternative models for English pronunciation teaching appeared in the last decades. These models are frequently based on the notion of English as an international language (EIL), where L2 speakers communicate with other L2 speakers more extensively than with native speakers. Consequently, it is claimed that students do not need to acquire a native-like pronunciation, which may be unintelligible to many L2 speakers, and that they should be taught a model that would be understood by speakers from various L1 backgrounds. One of such models is Jennifer Jenkins’s *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC), according to which students should focus on core elements of English pronunciation that are crucial for intelligibility in EIL (for more details see Jenkins 1998; Jenkins 2000).

The choice of an ideal model for a particular classroom may be based on multiple factors. For instance, Szpyra-Kozłowska (2015) argues for the preference for native varieties because they are used in most existing materials and they have a relatively stable amount of native speakers. Other aspects which are frequently taken into account are the likelihood of encounter with the variety (related to geographical proximity), its relative articulatory or perceptual difficulty or the

teacher's preference (Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck and Smit 1997; Mompeán 2004; Henderson et al. 2012; Carrie 2017).

One of the factors often neglected in the selection is the students' own preference. At present, however, a substantial number of studies are available investigating the students' attitudes towards multiple pronunciation varieties of English. In Szpyra-Kozłowska's (2004) questionnaire study, several models were presented to 134 Polish secondary-school students of intermediate level of English, who were then asked to select the variety they would prefer to learn at school. The results showed that while most students opted for a native model (RP: 40%, GA: 33%), only 13 per cent preferred LFC. The main arguments against this model were its artificial character and the fact that it ignores the perspective of native speakers. Similarly, 89 per cent of respondents at Polish, Italian and Spanish schools maintained that native pronunciation should be the aim for students of English (Nowacka 2012). For such reasons, the current study focuses solely on native pronunciation models.

Simon's (2005) study at a Belgian university showed that the majority of students (94%) preferred a native variety close to RP. Such preferences may be influenced by the tradition of using British English as a model at European schools, which is likely to bestow some overt prestige on the variety. Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck and Smit (1997) revealed similar results, namely that more than two thirds of Austrian university students favoured RP as a model for pronunciation. Cenoz and García Lecumberri (1999) examined the attitudes of Basque and Spanish university learners towards accents of English and found that RP was judged more favourably, and as easier to understand, than GA. Jarvella et al. (2001) reported that Danish university students rated RP tokens as more pleasant than GA speech samples. In Sweden, however, no such dominance of RP was observed, as certain groups of secondary school students tended to favour GA (Mobärg 1999). Carrie (2017) analysed language attitudes using the verbal guise technique and found for Spanish university students that RP was associated with greater status and prestige than GA, and as such was the target of the learners, but GA speakers were rated higher on the solidarity dimension.

As the attitudes of Czech students towards the two major native varieties of English have not been studied, it is the intent of the current study to provide such an insight. English does not have a very strong tradition in the Czech Republic, as it was only recently that English has established itself as the main foreign language at Czech schools (before 1989, it was Russian). Significant progress has been achieved in TEFL over the last decades, but it is perhaps not surprising that the quality of English teaching continues to differ between larger cities and local centres. Moreover, pronunciation competence may also depend on the speech opportunities outside of the classroom. It is therefore likely to expect that tourist, cultural and administrative centres, where English is more frequent, would yield (in comparison with other regions) more favourable conditions for TEFL and for direct experience with the language in general.

The aim of the study is thus threefold. Firstly, we aspire to provide an *approximate profile of a Czech secondary-school student* in terms of English learning. Such a profile would serve as a basis for more specific studies in the future. Secondly, we strive to examine the *students' ability to recognize RP and GA accents in connection with their attitudes towards British and American cultures*. Based on the results of similar studies in other European countries that incline towards RP and on the informal observation that British English is more frequently used at Czech schools, we hypothesize that Czech students will show a preference for the RP accent, although it is not clear whether this variety will also be identified with greater confidence than GA in a listening task. At the same time, a significant influence of American culture is expected to be observed as a result of the increasing prevalence of American culture in the Czech environment. We believe that examining accent preferences jointly with attitudes towards cultures is beneficial, as these may not be entirely independent. Thirdly, *a comparison of Prague schools and regional schools* is provided, which may constitute the most innovative aspect of our study. We can hypothesize that the three Prague schools will perform better than the regional schools in the identification test, as they tend to be perceived as high-quality school options; indeed, six out of the 10 most successful schools in 2011 state final exams were based in Prague (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2011). Moreover, the capital stands out in terms of the number of foreign residents, visiting tourists and languages spoken, which may be an even more relevant aspect (Czech Statistical Office 2017).

2. Method

The data were elicited from an extensive questionnaire which was handed out to Czech secondary-school students during their regular classes. In total, 254 students from five state grammar (secondary) schools participated in the study: three of the schools were in Prague (henceforth “Prague” schools), and two were in smaller towns (henceforth “regional” schools). All participants were native speakers of Czech only. The number of participants from each school was approximately equal (see Table 1). As the differences in the number of male and female students were not extreme and, moreover, we did not find any substantial gender-based differences in the results, we do not include this variable in the report below. The students were aged between 16 and 20 (mean age = 17.9) and were all expected to finish their secondary-school education within two years. Although the overall proficiency level of the students may have varied (and was not measured in a test), we believe that the impact of such variation on the results is reduced given that the students attended the same type of school and were of similar age and at a practically identical stage of their secondary-school studies.

Table 1. The number of participants with respect to school and gender.

School	Gender	<i>n</i>	Total
Prague 1	Female	25	57
Prague 1	Male	32	
Prague 2	Female	28	51
Prague 2	Male	23	
Prague 3	Female	33	55
Prague 3	Male	22	
Regional 1	Female	26	45
Regional 1	Male	19	
Regional 2	Female	28	46
Regional 2	Male	18	

The questionnaire consisted of five sections (see Appendix for individual questions) in this specific order: (1) English education, (2) English outside the classroom, (3) aesthetic evaluation test, (4) attitudes towards British and American accents and cultures, (5) accent identification test. For the purpose of the study, RP and GA were labelled as British and American English respectively as these are the terms most widely used to refer to the varieties among Czech students.

The first section investigated the students' education in English, focusing on the contents and preferred areas in secondary-school classes as well as in their private lessons, which are attended – according to informal observations – especially in Prague. The second section dealt with the way students use English outside of formal education. The emphasis was placed on the students' free-time activities, such as reading or watching films and TV series. In this section, the students were also asked to provide information about their visits to English speaking countries and their contact with native speakers of English.

In the third section, the students listened to a set of 12 English words (6 in British English, 6 in American English). Six salient features representing some of the differences between the two accents were chosen, and for each feature a pair of words sharing the respective feature was selected (e.g. *chance* [tʃɑ:ns] vs. *dance* [dæns]; see Table 2). We used audio samples from dictionaries and other online resources (Wells 2008; Forvo 2016; Macmillan 2016; OED 2016). Although each word was thus pronounced by a different speaker (always male), the recordings were comparable in terms of audio quality and speaking style (but see Discussion for speaker characteristics possibly affecting the results). The listening took place in the classrooms using the same loudspeakers. The students were asked to evaluate the words on a scale from 1 to 5 with respect to SOUND PLEASANTNESS and SUITABILITY AS A MODEL for pronunciation teaching. There was no mention of accents in the instructions, only pronunciation.

The fourth, most important section enquired about the students' attitudes towards British and American accents and cultures. The questions included the students' preference for living in one of the countries or their claimed ability to recognize the accents. (See Appendix for specific questions.)

The final section consisted of listening to the same set of words as in the third section. This time, the students were required to assign the words to one of the accents and to write them down orthographically. In both perceptual tests, the items were played in a fixed order which was the same for all schools and participants (the small number of items and class blocking did not allow for randomization). Clearly, the perceptual tests have many other limitations (e.g. small scope, crossed effects of speaker and accent). However, the inclusion of at least a simple perceptual test is important for interpretation of the questionnaire: if learners cannot identify the accents in the first place, the validity of their claims about accents might be compromised.

Table 2. The set of words and pronunciation features used as stimuli in the perceptual tests

Feature	British accent	American accent
[ɑ:] × [æ]	<i>chance</i> [tʃɑ:ns]	<i>dance</i> [dæns]
[ɒ] × [ɑ]	<i>block</i> [blɒk]	<i>knock</i> [nɒ:k]
[əʊ] × [oʊ]	<i>stone</i> [stəʊn]	<i>phone</i> [fəʊn]
Rhoticity (before a C)	<i>heart</i> [hɑ:t]	<i>start</i> [stɑ:rt]
Rhoticity (rhotic schwa)	<i>minor</i> [mɪnə]	<i>sinner</i> [sɪnə]
Alveolar flap	<i>meeting</i> [mi:tɪŋ]	<i>city</i> [sɪɾɪ]

The questionnaires were transcribed into spreadsheets and processed in the *R* software (R Core Team 2016). Evaluations on 5-point scales were analysed statistically with mixed-effects regression (LME) using the *R* package *lme4* (Bates et al. 2015). Figures were drawn using the packages *ggplot2* (Wickham 2009) and *effects* (Fox 2003). The LME analysis included the fixed effects and a random effect for speaker. The statistical significance of a predictor was evaluated in a goodness-of-fit test using maximum likelihood ratio by comparing the full model with a reduced model lacking the predictor.

3. Results

The first aim of the study was to provide a general profile of a Czech secondary-school pupil. With respect to legislature, students are obliged to learn a foreign language from the third grade of elementary school, i.e. from the age of eight or nine, and, although not mandatory, English is the officially recommended option (National Institute for Education 2017). Moreover, many schools offer English lessons from the first grade, and English is chosen as the main foreign language

by the vast majority of students. The results of our questionnaire show that, on average, Czech students start to learn English already between seven and eight years of age and perceive English as an important issue, being motivated for its study. In general, the students planned to develop their English skills further after taking a final school-leaving exam in English, and almost half of them sought education in English outside of school.

3.1 English at and outside of school

The first section of the questionnaire focused on the English-language education at Czech schools and on how it is perceived by the students. When given the options of reading, writing, listening, conversation and grammar on 5-point scales, the students marked *grammar* and *conversation* as significantly more frequently practised than the other three activities in English lessons (Fig. 1 on the left; $\chi^2(4) = 229, p < 0.001$). Figure 1 on the right presents the students' preference among the five activities. We can see that in most cases the students opted for conversation and reading (47% and 30% of respondents, respectively). Interestingly, listening – another activity directly related to pronunciation – seems not to be preferred by the students. As far as differences among individual schools are concerned, the results showed that conversation was the top choice at Prague schools, whereas it was reading at regional schools.

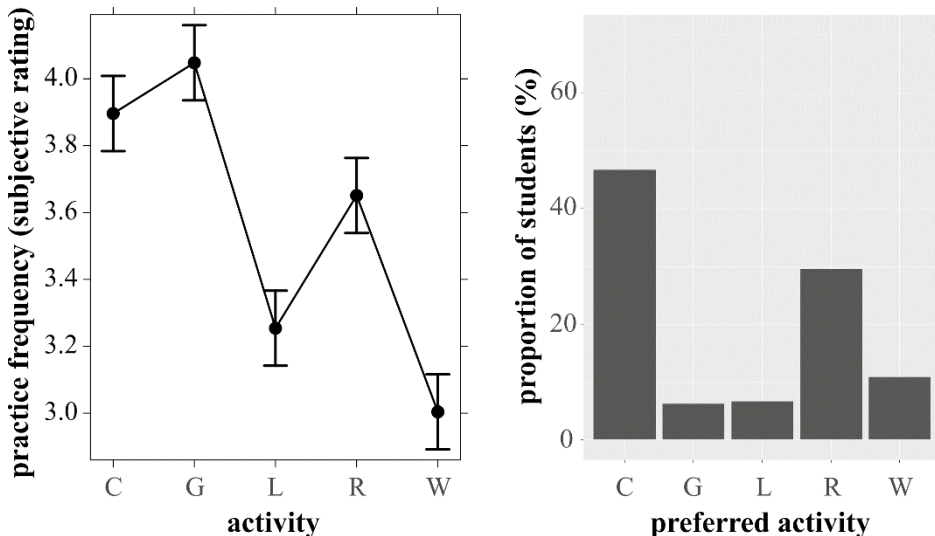


Figure 1. Activities at schools – conversation, grammar, listening, reading, writing. On the left, mean rating of practice frequency during classes (with 95% confidence intervals); on the right, the percentage of students who selected the given activity as preferred.

With regard to private education in English, almost half of the respondents attended private lessons at some time (especially in Prague), and they generally

preferred it over English at school. Among the most common reasons for attending private classes were general improvement (29%), perfecting communicational skills and reducing stress while speaking (21%), and motivation to pass an English exam (17%).

The second section of the questionnaire focused on English influence coming from environments other than education. On the one hand, the results revealed a strong dominance of American culture in the students' audiovisual entertainment choices. Figure 2 on the left shows that the vast majority (82%) of the films and TV series watched by the students were American (in both Prague and regional schools). On the other hand, data about visits to English-speaking countries show a prevalence of the UK (Fig. 2 on the right). Interestingly, while almost three quarters of the Prague-schools students have visited an English-speaking country for at least a week, only 33 per cent of the students from regional schools have done so (the proportions are lower for stays longer than two weeks, but the trend was analogical). The difference between the schools is apparent also from the fact that almost 55 per cent of the students from Prague school had a regular contact with a native speaker of English whereas the percentage of such students in regional schools was significantly lower (20%).

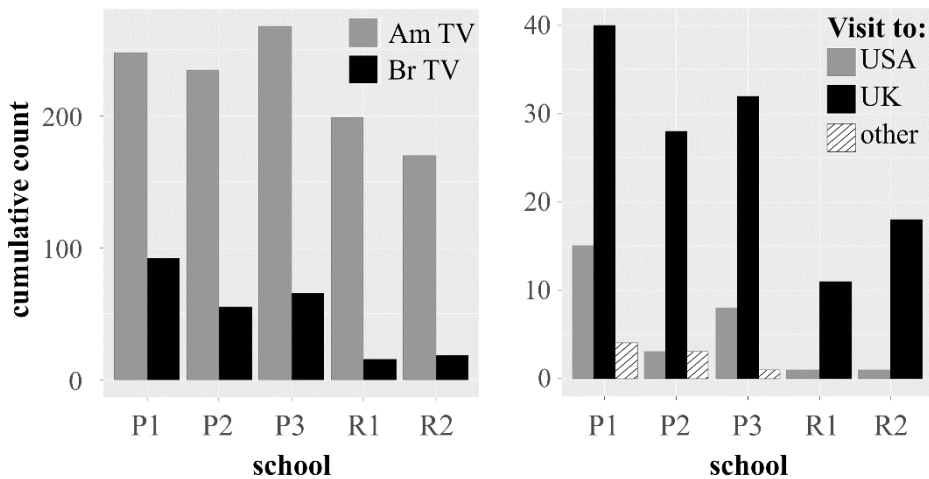


Figure 2. On the left, number of American and British television series grouped by school; on the right, number of visits to English-speaking countries grouped by school. (P = Prague, R = regional.)

3.2 Attitudes towards accents and cultures

The data from the section 4 show that three-quarters of the respondents claim to be able to distinguish the two accents (British and American). When describing the differences, however, only 14 per cent of those respondents were able to provide specific phonetic features and 25 per cent used unspecified "articulatory" reasons; the remaining 61 per cent based their assumption on aesthetic (sound)

perception (e.g., “the British accent is rougher” or “Americans sound like when singing”) or did not specify any phonetically relevant features at all (e.g. grammar).

The category of DEARNESS (*Which accent do you prefer or like more?*) was established to represent the students’ claimed preference for one of the accents. The British accent was favoured by approximately 42 per cent of the students, and approximately the same proportion of respondents showed preference for the American accent (the rest did not indicate any preference). Interestingly, this variable was shown to correspond closely to where the students would prefer to live for five years (Figure 3 on the left). The majority of students who would prefer living in the UK claimed to like the British accent more. The situation was reversed for those preferring a life in the USA. Finally, there was no accent preference asymmetry among students who would be equally willing to live in either of the two countries. However, as Figure 3 on the right shows, the British accent was considered more prestigious by most respondents regardless of the residence preference. When providing reasons for its prestige, the respondents most frequently mentioned the noble character of the accent (“it sounds more majestic”) and historical reasons (“it is the original accent”).

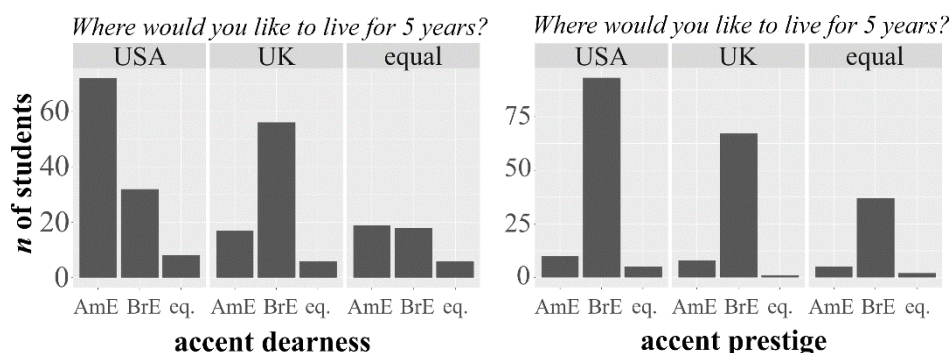


Figure 3. Preference for a five-year long stay in USA or UK according to accent dearness (on the left) and accent prestige (on the right).

3.3 Aesthetic evaluation and identification tests

The aesthetic evaluation test examined SOUND PLEASANTNESS (*How much do you like how the word sounds?*) and MODEL SUITABILITY (*Could the word serve as a pronunciation model?*) on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was the most positive and 5 the least positive. An LME analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the two accents. In terms of pleasantness, the average evaluation was 2.50 in case of the British accent and 2.70 in case of the American accent ($\chi^2(1) = 0.35, p > 0.05$). With regard to model suitability, 2.58 was the average evaluation of the British accent and 2.76 that of the American accent ($\chi^2(1) = 0.27, p > 0.05$). For both parameters, the most prominent difference within

a pair of words was between *phone* and *stone* (3.57×2.36 for pleasantness; 3.60×2.45 for model suitability).

The accent identification test took place after the section with accent-related questions. The total number of correctly identified tokens was 1788 (= 63% of all tokens). 58 per cent of these tokens were pronounced in British English, suggesting this accent is somewhat easier to identify for the students. Figure 4 on the left shows that the majority of the correct responses were elicited from those students who previously claimed that they were able to recognize the accents, and it was British English again that was more successful.

Since the chance level corresponds to 50 per cent in a choice between two alternatives, we set up a threshold of a 75% success rate (at least 9 out of the 12 words identified correctly for accent). In total, only 59 students (23% of all respondents) managed to reach this success rate. Moreover, interesting differences were found among the individual schools. In Figure 4 on the right we can observe that out of these 59 students, the majority ($n = 34$) belonged to one of the Prague schools (P1); in contrast, no student from P3 managed to reach the 75% criterion. Interestingly, one of the English teachers at P1 was a native British speaker, whereas there was no native teacher of English at P3. Consequently, if the results from the P1 school are put aside, there was no clear difference in accent identification between Prague and regional schools. The overall picture was that the students could not identify accents reliably.

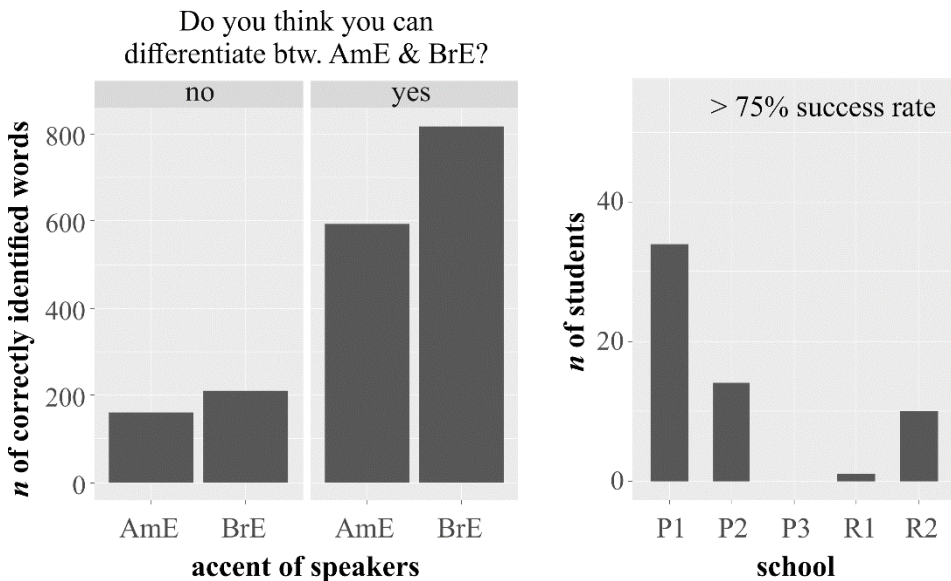


Figure 4. On the left, number of correctly identified words according to speaker's accent and claimed ability to recognize accents; on the right, number of students above the 75% success rate grouped by school. (P = Prague, R = regional)

4. Discussion

This study dealt with the attitudes of Czech secondary-school students towards English learning and towards British and American accents and cultures. In order to communicate successfully in an L2, satisfactory pronunciation is desirable, although not essential (indeed, few learners reach a native level). When teachers make a decision about which pronunciation model would be the best for a class, they should take into account not only their own views and/or objective factors, but also their students' own preferences. Naturally, such preferences may differ from student to student (and class to class). In these situations, the findings of our study can be used as a point of reference, or argument for a certain variety.

We believe it is neither possible nor desirable to ask about accents without investigating relevant cultural or socioeconomic aspects. In other words, the students' answers will most definitely be, explicitly or implicitly, influenced by the attitudes towards the countries in question (the UK and the USA). The current study was therefore based on an extensive questionnaire enquiring about the students' views on such matters, and was supplemented with preliminary aesthetic evaluation and accent identification tests on selected stimuli.

In general, students reported to be motivated for the study of English and tended to favour especially conversation and reading, i.e. activities extremely useful for developing their communication skills. However, the activity claimed to be most frequently covered in English lessons was grammar, followed by conversation. Without direct observation from classes or an in-depth analysis of teaching materials it is difficult to substantiate such judgements. Nevertheless, the students' declared necessity to practise verbal communication was reflected also in the fact that a quarter of those who attended private lessons strived to improve their conversation skills despite the high frequency of this activity at schools.

Due to a variety of social and technological changes, attitudes towards English and proficiency in the language are developed not only in school settings but also outside the classroom in interaction with other people. Therefore, free-time activities of the students were reflected in the questionnaire as well. Not surprisingly, American culture plays a major role in the viewing and listening habits of the respondents. American films and American TV series were found to be much more prevalent in the students' responses than British ones, and individual schools did not vary in this respect. However, the situation was different when it comes to visiting English-speaking countries. Although Britain was the most popular destination at all schools, students from Prague schools seem to have the opportunity to travel more often and also to various countries, including the USA. In addition to the higher economic background of parents in the capital of the Czech Republic, it may be the case that students from these schools are also more encouraged to travel by the teachers and parents, who might be more likely to see the benefits of multicultural exchange than people from regional cities. Similarly, the results showed that the students were more prone to

having regular contact with a native speaker of English in Prague than in the regional cities.

One of the major goals of the study was to investigate awareness of accent variation in English. We wanted to establish whether Czech students know about accents in the first place and in addition whether they can specify some of their features and recognize them in presented speech tokens (the scope was nevertheless limited to one American and one British accent). The students were generally aware that people talk differently in Britain and in the USA, and three out of four students even claimed to be able to discriminate the two accents. In reality, however, less than one quarter of all students reached the 75% success rate in identification of the accents that was part of a short perceptual test. Moreover, mere 14 per cent of the students who claimed to distinguish the British and American accent from each other were able to state a specific phonetic difference between the two accents. Therefore, we can assume that students overestimate their knowledge about accents and/or possibly lack sufficient knowledge in the field. Moreover, they might confuse the concept of *accent* with *dialect*, which would explain why the answers so frequently included for instance vocabulary differences. In any case, it is important to be careful with learner attitudes towards accents as they might not even recognize accents. (In their defence, the perceptual test was based on isolated words, which is likely to be more difficult than analysing whole phrases.)

It is interesting to compare what students think about the pronunciation varieties with their views of the two cultures. A plausible assumption is that an accent preference may be a consequence of how they feel about the country itself, or what kinds of stereotypes they have about speakers of a certain variety. On the whole we cannot say that one specific accent was preferred over the other, since the responses were balanced in this respect (including several “equal treatments” of the two accents). A similar conclusion can be drawn with regard to the two countries. However, the majority of students *did* indicate a preference, and this choice was in addition closely related to their attitudes towards the country (questions about where they would like to spend five years of their life, with whom they would prefer to work with, which culture is closer to them). The data revealed that almost every student seems to have a stronger affiliation either to the UK or the USA, its inhabitants and its accent.

A significant exception concerned two topics that are to some degree less subjective than the other preferences – accent prestige and worldwide impact of the country. The former was overwhelmingly attributed to British English, with reasons such as “older, original, majestic, noble”. Importantly, the higher status of British English was indicated regardless of the respondents’ preference for a country. A similar high agreement was reached with respect to the latter, as the USA was almost unanimously thought to have greater worldwide impact and importance to other countries. Connecting this finding with prestige, it is obvious that the perceived importance of the country does not determine the perceived

importance of the accent (if prestige is interpreted as importance, which may not necessarily be the case).

In the perceptual test, we asked students to evaluate specific words in terms of their sound pleasantness and model suitability. These two measures did not differ significantly and, moreover, the accent did not seem to be a relevant factor either. However, this lack of evidence for an implicit accent preference may be due to design limitations. For instance, isolated words may not be sufficient for the students to identify the accents in which they are pronounced. In this respect, connected speech samples might be more suitable. Furthermore, the evaluation tasks are heavily dependent on the recordings used. Despite a careful choice of the stimuli (obtained from various online databases and dictionaries), speaker characteristics and subtle differences in the quality of the recordings may have contributed to the evaluation of certain words; for instance, *phone* was evaluated significantly lower than its counterpart *stone*, as the only pair of words in the sample. However, we did not have a person that could convincingly produce the stimuli in both accents, which would be the ideal case in order to eliminate any between-speaker effects. Finally, the very limited number of stimuli (12 words and 6 features) would need to be expanded significantly in an experiment focused on this aspect. We should note, however, that our primary aim was to conduct a questionnaire study, supplemented with a preliminary perceptual test. We were also limited by time during the classes, and a longer test could not be incorporated into the session.

The second perceptual test – accent identification – revealed that not only was it difficult for the students to identify accents reliably, as mentioned above, but also that Prague schools performed better than regional schools. However, the statement must be qualified because it was mainly students from one of the three Prague schools who contributed to this result. A significant factor that needs to be addressed is the familiarity with different accents at individual schools. A very plausible explanation of the asymmetry concerns one of the teachers at the relevant school, who is a British native speaker. The students therefore have regular contact with British English, and they may be better able to identify it even based on short isolated words. It would be very interesting to compare our results with a school whose students have contact with a native speaker of American English instead.

5. Conclusion

The paper investigated the attitudes of Czech secondary-school students towards language learning and towards accents of English. This is of especial interest to the TEFL community in the Czech Republic, as this topic received relatively little attention in the country; however, the comparison of the capital with regional schools is an innovative aspect potentially interesting to a wider audience.

The findings from the questionnaire were in agreement with similar studies from other European countries in that the (standard) British accent was considered, by 78 per cent of the respondents, to be more prestigious than the (standard) American accent. However, positive attitudes towards the accents – accent dearness – varied depending on the respondents' preference for the two countries. When the participants stated they would prefer to live for five years in the USA (and not the UK), the tendency was to mark the American accent as more favourable, and vice versa. This confirms the more complex relation to accents generally, and suggests that cultural preferences and other non-accent attitudes should be examined carefully in similar studies. The analysis of stays in English-speaking countries revealed that the general trend was to visit the UK, probably due to its geographical proximity, which may have influenced the respondents' views on accents in favour of the British variety; furthermore, students from the capital travelled more than students from regional schools. In contrast, the participants were surrounded with American audio-visual culture (TV shows, films, music), and this was true irrespective of school region.

The study also included an accent evaluation test and an accent identification test based on several stimuli pronounced in British and American English. Although neither sound pleasantness nor model suitability differed consistently between the accents, the students were jointly able to identify two thirds of evaluated tokens. However, only a quarter of respondents managed to reach the 75% success rate, suggesting that raising awareness of accent variability in classes would be a desirable strategy for the EFL teacher. Interestingly, most of the above-the-threshold students were from one Prague school, which was the only one with a native British English teacher. Consequently, accent familiarity differed substantially between individual schools, a factor that needs to be addressed in any study of this type. Finally, given that the preliminary test had many limitations, a separate, fully-fledged perceptual study should be carried out examining Czech students' evaluations of different varieties of English, using for instance the verbal guise method.

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Appendix

This is a condensed version of the questionnaire distributed to the participants, translated into English. The condensed information was originally listed as separate questions. (R = reading, W = writing, L = listening, C = conversation, G = grammar)

GENERAL INFORMATION

Age / Sex

At what age did you start learning English?

Are you going to take the final exam in English?

Are you planning to study English after secondary school? (e.g.: university, private courses)

PART I: ENGLISH EDUCATION

(1) How much do you enjoy English classes?

A great deal – Much – Somewhat – Not much – Not at all

(2) How often do you do these activities (R / W / L / C / G) in the English classes?

Very frequently – Frequently – Occasionally – Rarely – Never

(3) Which of these activities is your favourite?

R – W – L – C – G

(4) What is the nationality of your English teacher?

Czech – British – American – Australian – Other (Specify)

(5) Have you ever attended private classes of English?

Yes / No

(6) When and for how long? (e.g.: “3 years ago for 1 year”)

.....

(7) How often? (e.g.: “60 minutes once a week”)

.....

(8) What was your motivation for taking up private lessons?

.....

(9)-(12) = (1)-(4) but this time concerning private classes.

PART II: ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

- (1) How often do you... read books in English?
 ... watch movies in English?
 ... watch TV shows in English?
 ... watch TV broadcasting or listen to the radio in English?
 ... watch videos in English (on Youtube or similar web pages)?
 ... play English PC games?
Daily – Several times a week – Less frequently
- (2) When watching movies and TV shows in English, do you use Czech subtitles?
Always – Often – Occasionally – Rarely – Never
- (3) Name five movies in the English language you have seen.
- (4) Mark TV shows in the English language which you watch (*from a list of 30 TV shows*).
- (5) Have you ever been on an exchange programme? When / in what country did the exchange take place? How long was it? What was the main language of the exchange?
- (6) Have you ever visited an English-speaking country? Which country? Which part (city, region)? When? How long was the visit? What was the purpose of the visit?
- (7) Are you in a regular contact with a native speaker of English? What is his/her nationality? How often are you in touch? How do you communicate? (*Email / Facebook / Skype / Phone / Other*)

PART III: LISTENING 1

On a five-point scale, answer the following questions regarding the individual words you will hear:

- (1) To what extent do you like the sound of the word?
A great deal – Much – Somewhat – Not much – Not at all
- (2) To what extent could the word be used as a model for pronunciation?
A great deal – Much – Somewhat – Not much – Not at all

PART IV: CULTURE AND ACCENT PREFERENCE

The best-known English-speaking countries are the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK).

- (1) In which of the countries would you choose to live for five years?
USA – UK – I don't mind which one
- (2) Which culture do you feel closer to?
American – British – I feel the same about either of them
- (3) Which of the countries has greater impact on the world events?
USA – UK – They have equal importance
- (4) Who would you rather work with?
An American person – A British person – I don't mind

The two prevalent variants (accents) of English are the British one and the American one.

- (5) Do you think you can recognize the two accents?
- (6) What are the differences between them (in terms of pronunciation)?
- (7) In your opinion, which of them has greater prestige? Why?
- (8) Which of them is closer to you? (= which do you like more)? Why?
- (9) Which of them is taught at your school? Do you try to use either of them in your speech?
- (10) Which of the accents is easier to listen to?
- (11) What other accents of English do you know?

PART V: LISTENING 2

Mark whether the word is pronounced in the British (Br) or the American (Am) accent. In addition, write down what word you heard.

Br – Am –