

Exploring the Preferences of Polish EFL Teachers towards the Accents of English

This language attitudes study investigates the preferences of EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers from Poland towards the accents of English they speak and teach. Despite the substantial amount of research on EFL learners, little has been done to investigate the impact of preferences of Polish teachers for different variations of English language on their students' language learning. This study's aim is to bridge this gap and provide the analysis of data gathered from 102 English teachers from Poland in March 2020. The first part of the study focused on the abilities of the teachers themselves, while the second part covered the attitudes towards the students' choices regarding the accents of English. The results show that among this particular group of Polish EFL teachers, American English accent is the easiest one to recognise and Filipino English the most difficult one to recognise. RP and General American accents prevail to be the most popular ones and there is a strong tendency to speak with these two particular accents, in favour to RP one. The findings are that Polish EFL teachers consider their own accents significant. The majority of the participants is satisfied with their own accents, but they still see the room for improvement, and they do not stop developing and upgrading their accent abilities and skills. When it comes to the attitudes towards the pronunciation of their students, Polish EFL teachers do not have any particular preferences considering the accents of their students or pupils. They let them freely choose the accent, and do not impose on them the model of pronunciation the teachers enjoy the most or the one they were taught to.

Keywords: EFL, accents of English, language attitude study

Erforschung der Präferenzen polnischer EFL-Lehrer gegenüber den englischen Akzenten

Diese Spracheinstellungsstudie untersucht die Präferenzen von EFL-Lehrern (Englisch als Fremdsprache) aus Polen in Bezug auf die englischen Akzente, die sie verwenden und unterrichten. Trotz der zahlreichen Forschungsarbeiten zu EFL-Lernern wurde bisher wenig unternommen, um die Wirkung der Präferenzen polnischer Lehrer für verschiedene Variationen des Englischen auf das Sprachenlernen ihrer Studenten zu untersuchen. Die vorliegende Studie hat zum Ziel, diese Lücke auszufüllen und eine Analyse von Daten zu präsentieren, die im März 2020 von 102 polnischen Englischlehrern gesammelt wurden. Der erste Teil der Studie konzentrierte sich auf die Fähigkeiten der Lehrer selbst, während der zweite Teil die Einstellung gegenüber der Wahl der englischen Akzente von Schülern betraf. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass in dieser bestimmten Gruppe polnischer EFL-Lehrer der amerikanische Englischakzent am einfachsten und das philippinische Englisch am schwierigsten zu erkennen ist. Die Akzente „RP“ und „General American“ sind die beliebtesten und es gibt eine starke Tendenz, mit diesen beiden Akzenten zu sprechen, zugunsten des RP-Akzents. Darüber hinaus finden die polnischen EFL-Lehrer ihren eigenen Akzent bedeutend. Die Mehrheit der Befragten ist mit ihrem Akzent zufrieden, aber sie sehen immer noch Raum für Verbesserungen und hören nicht auf, ihre Akzentfähigkeiten zu entwickeln und zu verbessern. Wenn es um die Einstellung zur Aussprache ihrer Schüler geht, haben polnische EFL-Lehrer keine besonderen Präferenzen. Sie lassen ihre Schüler die freie Wahl des Akzents und zwingen ihnen nicht das Modell der Aussprache auf, das den Lehrern am besten gefällt oder das ihnen gelehrt wurde.

Schlüsselwörter: EFL, Englische Akzente, Spracheinstellungsstudien

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1. Introduction

The English language has never been standardised nor unified as one coherent entity, rather it has always been a conglomerate of many varieties of this language. This vast linguistic diversity, observed and captured in World Englishes paradigm by Kachru (1985), poses a considerable challenge in teaching English as a second language. In an ideal learning environment, students would acquire a second language in varied, multi-lingual groups, with teachers with native-like accents, who would propose excellent pronunciation models for their students. Unfortunately, in many schools all the world over, students learn a second language in monolingual groups, being taught by the teachers who rarely have native-speaker accents; hence they do not constitute ideal pronunciation models.

The research on language attitudes has a long tradition and there exists a considerable body of literature on Polish speakers' beliefs and opinions towards English pronunciation. Prior studies mostly presented the attitudes of Polish students, as learners of the English as the second language. Szpyra-Kozłowska (2004) investigated attitudes towards English pronunciation among the learners from the Polish high schools, Krzyżyński (1988), Sobkowiak (2002), Waniek-Klimczak (1999) did alike research, but on a different education level, aimed at university students' attitudes. Most of the research on language attitudes in Poland are focused on explaining this phenomenon from a perspective of a student and despite considerable amount of existing studies devoted to students' attitudes, there is a gap in the Polish academic research focusing on the other perspective: the one of the teachers and their attitudes towards the pronunciation models, which remains an open problem in this area, often discussed among the groups of teachers¹. According to Sobkowiak (2002: 177–178), studies on language attitudes from the perspective of students “are an important source of teachers' critical reflection on the aims, methods and results of the courses which they offer, as well as of the didactic process on a macro scale”. This article's aim is to bridge the existing gap and to investigate the approach to the accents of English among the group of Polish teachers of English as a second language. The study was conducted in March 2020 in Poland among 102 teachers from various education levels who completed the survey. The results and discussion below are the product of an analysis of the questionnaires, as well as extra comments concerning the area of pronunciation teaching, provided by the interviewees.

2. Procedure and participants

The study was conducted in March 2020. It was planned to be conducted in a traditional way, by means of collecting paper versions of the questionnaires, but due to the outbreak of Covid-19, it was carried out implicitly on-line. The link to the electronic

¹ Cf. <http://forum.mlingua.pl/archive/index.php/t-34110.html>, date of access: 5.1.2021.

version of questionnaire was sent to the teachers working in primary, secondary, and high schools in Poland, as well as university teachers. The answers were provided by 103 participants. All of them were Polish, non-native speakers of English, 87 women and 15 men took part. Participants' age ranged from 20 to 60 years old. In the questionnaire there was also a possibility of choosing "more than 60 years old" option, but not a single person chose it. The majority of the respondents belonged to the "from 31 to 40 years old" group (30,4%). The other were as follows: "from 26 to 30 years old" (29,4%), "from 20 to 25 years old" (19,6%), "from 41 to 50 years old" (16,7%), and "from 51 to 60 years old" (3,9%). The on-line form of the questionnaire could lead to obtaining the data from the younger generation of teachers. When it comes to the education of the respondents, 75% of them claimed to have gained master's degree, 20% – bachelor's degree. Only 5% of the respondents attained a higher level of education than the majority of the interviewees – 4% obtained doctoral title and 1% – professor. The respondents were also asked to specify their experience both in learning and teaching English as a second language.

As far as learning English as a second language is concerned, the vast number of respondents claimed to be learning English for "more than 16, but less than 20 years" – 30,4%. The second largest group (28,4%) claimed to be learning English for more than 21, but less than 30 years, the third group (21,6%) – "more than 11, but less than 15 years", the fourth group (17,6%) – "more than 30 years" and finally the smallest group (2%) opted for learning English for "more than 6, but less than 10 years".

When it comes to teaching English as a second language, the majority of respondents (34,3%) claimed to be teaching it for "more than 1 year, but less than 5 years". The other groups were as follows: 24,5% – "more than 6 years, but less than 10 years", 17,6% – "more than 11 years, but less than 15 years", 12,7% – "more than 16 years, but less than 20 years", and finally the least numerous, but the most experienced group – 10,8% – "more than 20 years". The reason for such distribution of values could be aforementioned electronic method of obtaining the data. In the survey, some of the questions were open-text ones and the majority of answers were submitted in English language, but some of the respondents used the Polish language. In case of submitting the comments in Polish language, the author has translated them for the sake of this article into English.

3. Results and discussion

Polish teachers of English as a second language proved their awareness of the accent as a phenomenon. All of the respondents answered positively to the question about them being aware of existence of various accents in the English language.

In the next part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to tick the accents, which they think they could recognise when hearing someone speaking in English. The interviewees could choose among 20 various accents of English. The names

of the accents were put in alphabetical order, for respondents to look thoroughly over them, and in order not to randomly choose only these which were at the beginning of the table or so.

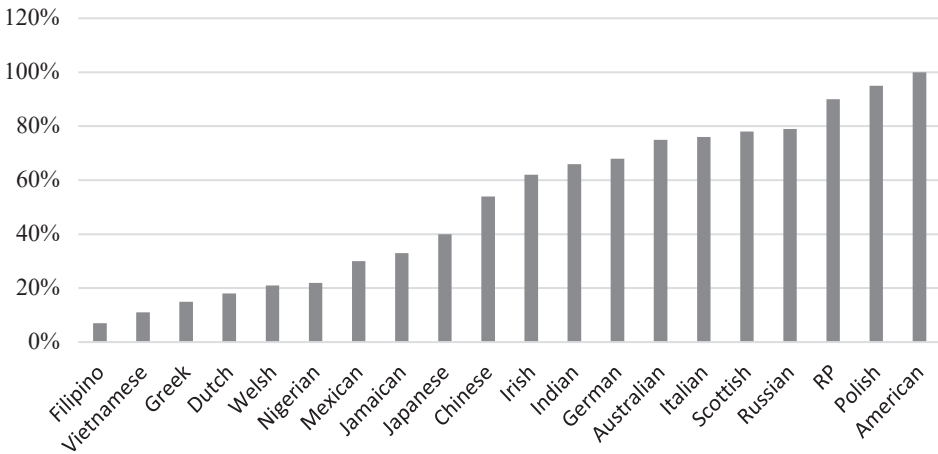


Fig. 1. The ability to recognise the accents of English

The hypothesis was that the highest number of respondents would choose accents in the following order: the Polish accent would be chosen by every respondent, then the Received Pronunciation chosen by the majority of the respondents, and in the third place the American accent. The study proved this hypothesis partially wrong: these three accents were still the three most popular to be recognised, but in a different order. The American accent was chosen as the one most commonly being recognised – 100% of the respondents claim that they could recognise it. The second most likely to be recognised accent of English is the Polish accent – it was chosen by 94,1% of respondents. Surprisingly, the Received Pronunciation accent is considered as the one to be recognised by 89,4% of respondents. Due to all respondents being native speakers of Polish, and English being their second language, it was presumed that all of them would recognise Polish accent of English. Moreover, in Poland, in the studies of Janicka et al. (2005), Received Pronunciation is described by the respondents as the most desired accent of their own pronunciation to which they aspire to, which could lead to conclusion that it should also be an accent easy to recognise in the English language. The study points out that the trends in accent recognition of these three most popular ones are different than firstly presumed. American and Received Pronunciation are the most commonly taught varieties of English during university courses, e.g. in Adam Mickiewicz University, where students can join Descriptive Grammar courses aiming at mastering these two types of pronunciation (Janicka et al. 2005). A comprehensive description of the phonetic component taught at AMU is provided by Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk et al. (1999). The main difference, easy to grasp for an average learner of English as a second language, between these two are the presence of post-vocalic /r/ and tapped /t/ in an American model of pronunciation.

When it comes to the other accents, Russian is the fourth most popular to recognise accent (recognised by 79,4% of the respondents). This trend possibly grows due to the parallels between Polish and Russian languages and the origins in the Slavic language family. The next accent is Scottish, which is the second British accent after the Received Pronunciation. Scottish accent is claimed to be recognised by 77,5% of respondents. It has some distinctive features, such as lack of phoneme /ʊ/ (Wells 1981), conservative consonant system, and especially the phoneme /r/ being realised as an alveolar tap [ɾ] or the traditional trill being the characteristic Scottish sound (Wells 1982). Moreover, Scottish vowel system varies from the one of the Received Pronunciation or General American.

Among the accents from the British Isles, the Welsh accent is classified as being the least likely to be recognised, with only 21,6% respondents being able to distinguish it. When accents outside Europe are analysed (apart from American and Australian, which are considered as native English), Indian English has proved to be the most popular (66,7% of respondents are able to recognise it), and Filipino to be the least popular in terms of the ability to recognise the accents (5,9%). Non-native English accents, such as Italian, German, or Chinese Englishes, are recognised by more than half of respondents.

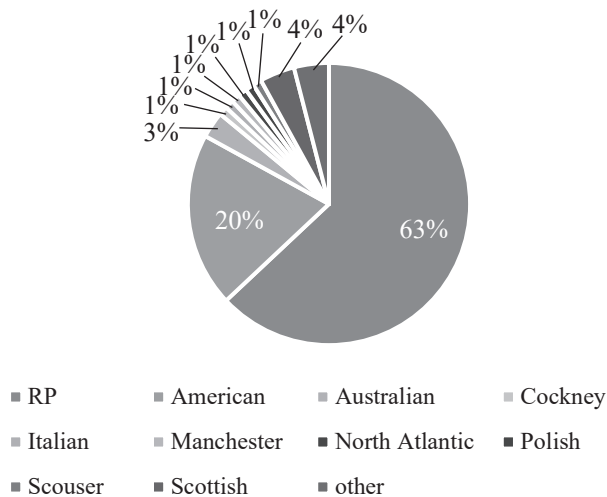


Fig. 2. Distribution of the desired accents of English

Figure 2 presents the distribution of accents which respondents desire to have in their own pronunciation and shows that 63% of the respondents desire to be able to speak with RP accent, 20% with the American accent, and some individuals would like their own accents to be either Australian, Cockney, Italian, Manchester, North Atlantic, Polish, Scouser, Scottish or other. This question was an open-text one, in which the respondents did not choose between the given possibilities, but they needed to provide the answer themselves, in order not to put any cognitive bias, emerging

from the suggestion of any particular accent. Similarly to the previous studies of Polish speakers (Krzyżyński 1988, Sobkowiak 2002, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2004), Received Pronunciation is still the most popular accent in Poland, and the one which speakers aspire to (63%). This result also ties well with previous studies of Jenkins (1988) who points out the supremacy of the Received Pronunciation accent. The second most popular accent in terms of desire to be spoken with, is the American accent (20%). The third most popular accent is Scottish, but with only 4% of respondents aspiring to use it. In individual cases, respondents pointed Cockney, Italian, Australian, Manchester, North Atlantic, Polish, and Scouser varieties of English (1% per each accent). 4% of respondents did not state any particular accent – they provided answers, such as: “it doesn’t matter” (two such answers), “being able to switch [between accents]” (two such answers). A prior study of Szpyra-Kozłowska (2004) reported more approximate distribution of values when it comes to preferences of American and British accents. In data collected by her from 130 secondary school pupils, 40,2% chose British model of pronunciation and 32,8% American pronunciation.

In the next question of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide the information concerning the accent they actually spoke. The type of the question, similarly to the previous one, was an open-text question. In this part, many comments have emerged. The respondents show a desire to speak *clear* native-speaker’s accents, especially Received Pronunciation or American, but they are conscious of their lacks in mastering them. The examples of these answers: *I hope it is RP, bastardised RP, unfortunately with Polish influence, near-RP, but I still have a lot to learn, I try my best, I speak clear British accent, but I do not think it sounds native like, none, fake British, something similar to Received Pronunciation, mixture of Received Pronunciation and Polish, but there is more of Polish in this mixture, approximate (with a smiling emoji), something near to Received Pronunciation, mixture of Polish, American and Received Pronunciation, mixture of Polish, Received Pronunciation and Dutch*. Without any extra comments, such as above mentioned, only 23% of respondents described their accent as American English and 29% as Received Pronunciation English. 48% of respondents did not clearly state their accent but described it as *a mixture* of various accents (most popular: Received Pronunciation, American and Polish).

In the next part of the study, the respondents were asked to describe their satisfaction with their own accent.

Despite many insecure comments about their accents in the previous question, as presented in Figure 3, 76% of respondents claim to be happy with their own accent, 12% simply stated that their own accent is not satisfactory, while the remaining 12% provided more detailed comments on this matter, stating that they are partially happy with their accents. The examples of the comments were as follows: *fifty-fifty, I hope it is communicative, I pronounce the words correctly, but holistically the accent does not sound as any particular accent, it could be better, it used to be better but the school simplified it, it is not bad, but not the best, hard to say, I do my best, but sometimes*

I do not sound the way as I want to, in like 70% [I am happy], it could be better and I am still working on it, I am still bringing it into perfection, it depends on a day, it varies, it's not bad, but it could be better. Polish teachers tend to derive greater satisfaction from their accents than Spanish teachers. Walker (1999) in her research on Spanish teachers of English a second language has demonstrated that 65% of primary school teachers, 49% of secondary school teachers and 27% teachers working with adults are unhappy with their accent.

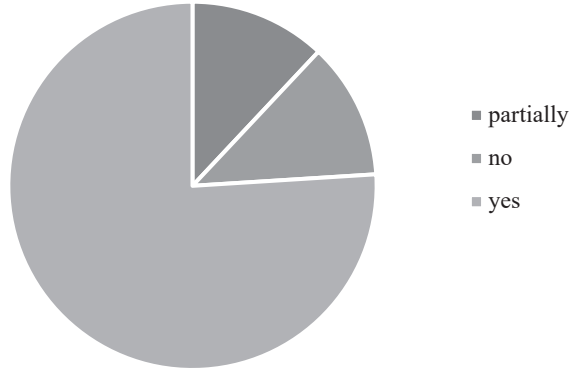


Fig. 3. Satisfaction with own accent

The next five questions were asked in the form of statements on the Likert scale to gauge respondents' feelings. The respondents answered the questions concerning mastering their own accents, the significance of their own accents for them, the significance of their students' and pupils' accents, imposing their own accents on their students' pronunciation and the respondents' attitudes towards native and non-native accents. The five response categories method was chosen in order to exhibit the level of agreement or disagreement. The results are presented in the Fig. 4.

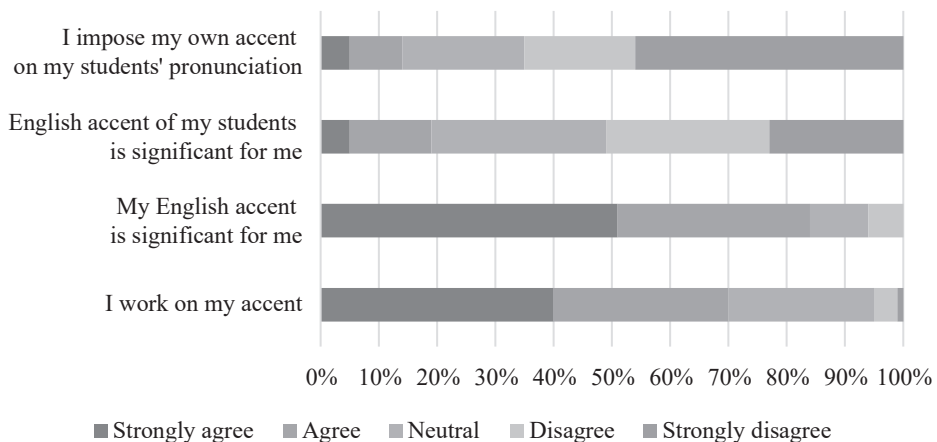


Fig. 4. Attitudes towards the accents

The responding Polish teachers of English as a second language shared their feelings towards working on their own accent of English. The substantial majority agrees or even strongly agrees with the statement that they work on their accents. Similarly to some comments in the section of stating the accent they actually speak, Polish teachers of English as a second language prove to be self-aware towards their accent and demonstrate the desire to develop in the field of their phonetics. They also seem to understand the idea of lifelong learning, and despite them being active professionally, as well as being graduates, they still want to gain new skills when it comes to their accents.

The next statement investigated the significance of their own accent of English for the respondents. 51% claimed that it is very significant, 33,3% – significant, 9,8% – neutral, 5,9% – insignificant. Nobody has chosen the “very insignificant” option. It shows that for the majority of the teachers of English as the second language, their own accent of English matters. These results are coherent with the results obtained in the previous questions – regarding the accent the respondents actually speak and the desire to master their accents.

The next two statements focused on the attitudes of the teachers towards the accents of their students. The first one was of interest to investigate the significance of the students’ accents to the teachers, and the other one examined whether teachers impose their own accents on the pronunciation of their students. Janicka et. al (2005) investigated the views of the students of the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland (today’s AMU Faculty of English), aspiring to be teachers in the upcoming future, regarding accent teaching and whether they see the need of imposing the particular accent on their future students. In her study, nearly all the respondents claimed the willingness to impose on their own students the model of pronunciation they had learned themselves. It was generalised that “the respondents would impose an American or British standard on their prospective students” (2005: 259). The data presented in Fig. 5, collected from the experienced, practising teachers, reveals that the teachers do not find the accent of their students significant and they do not attach importance to the choice of the accent of their students. 33,3% of the respondents claimed that they have a neutral attitude towards the accent of their students, while for 53% the choice of accent of their students is insignificant or even very insignificant. Contrary to the findings of Janicka et. al. (2005), only 9,8% of teachers impose the model of pronunciation they had learned themselves on their students. There are 20,6% of respondents claiming to be neutral in this field, while nearly 70% give their students free choice regarding the accent they want to use.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to explore the preferences of Polish teachers of English as a second language towards the accents of English. The analysis of this study leads to the following conclusions:

- (1) American accent of English is the easiest to recognise for Polish EFL teachers.
- (2) Received Pronunciation and General American accents are still the two most popular accents among the Polish teachers of English as a second language. There is a strong desire to have models of pronunciation of these accents, in favour to Received Pronunciation accent.
- (3) Polish teachers of English as a second language find their own accents significant. The majority of them is satisfied with their own accents, but they still see the room for improvement, and they do not stop working on their accents.
- (4) Polish teachers of English as a second language do not have any particular preferences when it comes to accents of their students. They give freedom to their students or pupils in regard to the choice of the accent, and do not impose on them the model of pronunciation they enjoy the most or the one they were taught to.

This study towards examining the preferences of Polish teachers of English as a second language towards the accents of English is a valuable addition to the prior findings in this field. This provides a good starting point for discussion and further research. Future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by enlarging the number of participants of the study and providing more detailed questions about the respondents' preferences towards the accents, such as motivations of choosing the particular model of pronunciation.

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