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BACHELOR THESIS

Czech High School Students' Attitudes and Beliefs about Native and Non-Native English  
Accents

Postoj českých středoškolských studentů k rodilým a nerodilým přízvukům angličtiny

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I hereby declare that the bachelor thesis 'Czech High School Students' Attitudes and Beliefs about Native and Non-Native English Accents' is my original work and no other sources than those listed on the Works cited page were used in its making. I also declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another or the same university degree.

Prague, July 6, 2021

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## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis explores Czech high school students' attitudes and beliefs about native and non-native English accents. The theoretical part offers a comparison of the most significant research surveys both in Czech and foreign context. Furthermore, it also deals with the issues of accent discrimination towards native and non-native accents of English. The empirical part is based on a questionnaire survey. Its aim is to discover what knowledge of native and non-native accents Czech high school students have. It focuses primarily on the importance of accent among students and their personal pronunciation goals, for example if they would like to achieve native-like pronunciation. In addition, it explores what factors most influence students' choice of accent and how important they view the pronunciation of their teachers. Two groups of students were examined, students of the first and fourth year of grammar school.

## **KEYWORDS**

accent attitudes, native accents, non-native accents, accent discrimination

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá postoje českých středoškolských studentů k rodilým a nerodilým přízvukům angličtiny. Teoretická část nabízí porovnání nejdůležitějších výzkumných šetření v českém a zahraničním kontextu. Řeší mimo jiné i problematiku diskriminace rodilých a nerodilých akcentů. Empirická část je založená na dotazníkovém šetření. Jeho cílem je zjistit, jaké znalosti mají středoškolští studenti ohledně rodilých a nerodilých akcentů. Zaměřuje se na význam přízvuku pro studenty samotné a na jejich osobní cíle v oblasti výslovnosti, například zda chtějí dosáhnout úrovně blízké rodilému mluvčímu. Dále se věnuje faktorům, které středoškolské studenty ve výběru anglického přízvuku nejvíce ovlivňují a tomu, jak vnímají důležitost výslovnosti u svého učitele. Zkoumány budou dvě skupiny studentů, studenti prvního ročníku a studenti čtvrtého ročníku gymnázia.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

postoje k akcentům, rodilé přízvuky, nerodilé přízvuky, diskriminace akcentů

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## INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation plays a vital role in acquiring any foreign language. In the Czech Republic, pupils start learning English approximately at the age of 8 or 9, yet after having finished high school many are largely unfamiliar with such phenomena as schwa or the International Phonetic Alphabet. I myself was such a case. Ever since I started learning foreign languages, I have always been interested in the way other languages sound and the differences between them. However, it was only at university that I first discovered the beauty of phonetics and phonology. Suddenly, I started reminiscing about my own accent attitudes, how they formed and why they were of such importance to me. Consequently, I became interested in the attitudes and beliefs of other learners of English.

One specific memory ignited my interest and helped me shape the topic of my thesis. When I was at high school and there would be a new English teacher, I would always be interested in the new teacher's accent in English and looking forward to hearing it. When the accent was more native-like, I noticed a fleeting feeling of satisfaction, when not I was a bit disappointed. That is to say, I knew very well that the degree of foreign accentedness in the teachers' speech was not equivalent to the teaching skills of the individual, yet I noticed this 'first hearing' evaluation of the teacher. Having experienced this, I wanted to explore whether other learners of English also share this experience. Later on, I wondered whether high school students have a goal when it comes to their accent, what influences their pronunciation most and the extent to which they are acquainted with non-native accents of English.

The theoretical part of my thesis thus scrutinises accent attitudes with a focus on the most significant research studies in a local and global context. Secondly, it also examines accent discrimination. The practical part comprises a questionnaire survey, which was distributed to first and fourth year students at three different high schools (2 regional high schools and a high school in Prague). Its aim was to determine personal accent attitudes of the high school students

and also to observe their opinions on the importance of the pronunciation of their English teachers.

## **THEORETICAL PART**

### **1.1 Attitudes**

As the word attitudes will appear many times in this thesis, it needs to be defined. Oppenheim introduces the notion of attitude in a complex way. He describes it as ‘an inner component of mental life, which expresses itself, directly or indirectly, through much more obvious processes as stereotypes, beliefs, verbal statements or reactions, ideas and opinions, selective recall, anger or satisfaction or some other emotion and in various other aspects of behaviour.’ (Oppenheim 39). Moreover, Allport states that an attitude is ‘a learned disposition to think, feel and behave toward a person, or object, in a particular way’ (Allport 18-20). Similarly, Garret emphasises the importance of social environment and personal experience on forming attitudes. Furthermore, he presents attitudes as having three components: a cognitive component, an affective component and a behavioural component. He connects these components to language attitudes in this example:

‘In terms of language, then, if we were considering a student’s attitude towards Spanish as a foreign language, we could talk about *a cognitive component* (she believes that learning Spanish will give her a deeper understanding of Spanish culture), *an affective component* (she is enthusiastic about being able to read literature written in Spanish), and *a behavioural component* (she is saving money to enrol on a Spanish course).’ (Garret 23).

### **1.2 Language attitudes**

Language attitudes deal with ‘the relationships of speakers of different languages or language varieties towards each other’s’ languages or to their own language’ (Richards and Schmidt 286). They are developed at a very young age and are liable to change. In the early stages of life, children ‘tend to prefer their own language variety’ (Dragojevic), however as they

begin to socialise, they generally obtain the attitudes of ‘the dominant group’ (ibid). Further on in life, language attitudes can be formed through various influences – peers, educators or the media, and may ‘change in response to shifts in intergroup relations or government language policies’ (ibid). As Richards and Schmidt state ‘expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status etc’. Studying language attitudes is therefore vital, as it not only shows ‘what people feel about speakers of a particular language’ (Richards and Schmidt 286), but also provides insight into language teaching and planning (ibid).

The notion of standard variety is inherently connected with language attitudes. The standard variety of American English is understood as Standard American English and the standard variety of British English is Standard British English (Richards and Schmidt 509). Richards and Schmidt define standard variety as ‘the variety of a language which has the highest status in a community or nation and which is usually based on the speech and writing of educated native speakers of the language’ (509). Thus, when the notion of accented and unaccented speech is tackled, foreign-accented speech represents a ‘noticeable’ deviation from standard (Derwing and Munro, Processing Time 289).

Historically speaking, the standard varieties have understandably been given a lot of attention. The American and British variations have been researched since the 1950s with ‘extensive data banks having been established’ at the Universities of London or Birmingham (Kachru 5), and it was only in the second half of the last century that foreign and regional accents were studied (Derwing and Munro, Pronunciation Fundamentals 133). In 1985 Kachru developed ‘The Three Circle Model of English<sup>1</sup>’. With the introduction of the term *Outer Circle* which represents second language users in the former colonies and the term *Expanding Circle*

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<sup>1</sup> The Three Circle Model of English consists of the Inner Circle (norm providing), the Outer Circle (norm developing) and the Expanding Circle (norm dependent) (Seidlhofer 8-9).

which stands for English as a foreign language (Seidlhofer 8-9), Kachru brought ‘linguistic and cultural diversity to the English language’ (Kachru 181) and helped to shift the focus towards Second Language (L2) speakers. In 1995 Derwing and Munro conducted research that showed accentedness<sup>2</sup> and intelligibility<sup>3</sup> to be ‘partially independent’ (Poesová and Uličná, Factors Affecting Second Language Pronunciation Learning). The results point out that even strongly accented speech does not hinder intelligibility. Nevertheless, the foreign-accented utterances may require a ‘longer time to process’ (Derwing and Munro, Processing Time 289) and are perceived to be more difficult to understand. Intelligibility and comprehensibility<sup>4</sup> appear to be ‘more closely related’ (Poesová and Uličná, Factors Affecting Second Language Pronunciation Learning). The study demonstrated that learners do not need to sound native-like in order to be intelligible (Derwing and Munro, Processing Time 289-303).

Later on, Jenkins directed her research at the superiority of standard varieties of English and highlighted the preservation of one’s identity and thus the accentedness of one’s speech while intelligibility was to be maintained (Jenkins, ELF from the classroom to the classroom 486). Along with Derwing and Munro, Jenkins also contributed to the preference for the Intelligibility Principle<sup>5</sup> over the Nativeness Principle<sup>6</sup> nowadays.

### 1.3 Accent attitudes

‘People hold attitudes to language at all its levels: spelling and pronunciation, words, grammar, accent and pronunciation, dialects and languages’ (Garett 2). It is accent and pronunciation that Garett describes to be ‘most potent’ when investigating factors for

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<sup>2</sup> Accentedness ‘refers to how strong the talker’s foreign accent is perceived to be.’ (Derwing and Munro Processing Time 291)

<sup>3</sup> Intelligibility ‘refers to the extent to which an utterance is actually understood.’ (ibid)

<sup>4</sup> Comprehensibility ‘refers to listeners’ perceptions of difficulty in understanding particular utterances.’ (ibid)

<sup>5</sup> The intelligibility principle ‘holds that learners simply need to understand.’ (Levis 370)

<sup>6</sup> The nativeness principle ‘holds that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language.’ (ibid)

determining attitudes within a language (95-96). Richards and Schmidt define accent as ‘a particular way of speaking which tells the listener something about the speaker’s background’ – be it the region or country of origin, social class or the degree of one’s accentedness (3).

Accent attitudes are generally studied in regard to two evaluative dimensions: status (e.g. educated, intelligent) and solidarity (e.g. friendly, pleasant) (Dragojevic). In order to investigate accent attitudes, the researchers make use of the matched-guise technique or questionnaires, frequently followed by interviews. Accent attitudes studies can be divided into two halves – the first half reflects accent attitudes towards native accents of English, the second half examines the perception of non-native accents. Concerning native accents, attention has mostly been given to the preference between the General American Accent (GA) versus the General British Accent (GB) and the different perception of GA and GB (prestige vs social attractiveness). The research on non-native accents focuses on the various perceptions of accented speech and its effects on the likeability and credibility of an individual. In the following summary of research studies, the respondents were usually either high school students or university students as their attitudes are believed to be ‘fully formed and relatively consistent’ (Carrie 433) as the formation of attitudes usually develops in adolescence and does not undergo significant changes through life (Bohner and Wänke 71-87).

The formation of accent attitudes can influence speakers either positively or negatively. As far as positive aspects are concerned, the learners choose their model of preference based on their congenial experience with an accent (favourite movie, favourite character). On the other hand, accent attitudes may also lead to stereotyping and eventually to accent discrimination. Both of the mentioned aspects will be examined further on.

### **1.3.1 Accent attitudes among university students**

Research on accent attitudes towards native accents of English has received a lot of attention, especially at universities. As expected, General British (GB) and General American pronunciation (GA) occupy the centre of interest as they are viewed as the most mainstream varieties of English pronunciation. The following two summaries focus on some of the most vital studies carried out at universities both in international and local contexts. A review of all the existing research on accent attitudes is beyond the scope of this chapter and therefore only some research studies will be presented.

#### **1.3.1.1 International context**

Relatively complex research has been conducted in Spain (Cenoz and Lecumberri, Mompeán, Carrie). Cenoz and Lecumberri, whose study took place at the University of the Basque country, reported a preference for GB rather than GA among the participants with an English major. They also commented on the perception of difficulty of native accents. The British accents were assessed as easier than the American accent or Irish English. The results also hinted at a correlation between the perception of each accent and the preference. The accents easier to understand were viewed more positively (Cenoz and Lecumberri 10-11).

A 2002 study of English philology students of the University of Murcia confirmed the positive attitudes held towards GB, finding that 71% of the students preferred to imitate the British pronunciation as they reckoned it to be the ‘purest, since it originated in England’; they also evaluated it as more intelligible compared to GA or the Irish accent. The American accent was labelled as ‘influential, more modern and more practical for business relations’ (Mompeán 1047) among those who showed interest in GA (17%). The rest inclined towards the Irish accent (12%), mostly because of their affection for Ireland or Irish culture. When asked how many accents they would like to learn, the vast majority stated only one, and only 8% wanted to learn

more than one – the choice being between GA and the Irish accent. This research again points out that when asked about what accent they want to speak, most students understandably think of the native ones, and non-native accents do not come to mind. Mompeán and his colleagues further believe that GB ought to be taught at Spanish schools, but that the phonetic and phonological aspects should be compared to GA (Mompeán 1046-1056).

Similarly to the previous outcomes, Carrie's 2017 research reported the inclination of English Philology students from Spain towards GB. British pronunciation was, as before, described as the 'pure English' or 'more professional' (Carrie 438-439). One of the factors that influenced a speaker's choice of accent was the geographical proximity and practicality of GB (Carrie 439). The students believed that when it came to their future career, GB would be more practical than GA, which contradicts Mompeán's findings (Mompeán 49). Carrie noticed extreme responses to GB speakers which indicated that the speakers were either seen as competent or very socially unattractive. This shows that GB and GA manifest a 'dichotomous relationship' (442). An accent is therefore either more prestigious or scores highly in terms of solidarity and social attractiveness, which in the case of this study is General American. Last but not least, Carrie observed that the speakers believed their way of speaking to be similar to that of native speakers, whom they found to be more socially attractive (438-443).

Changing the location and focusing on Central Europe, 132 university students of English in Austria were examined, and once again a prevailing preference for British English was confirmed. More than two thirds of the participants stated that their desired pronunciation was GB. Moreover, it was also corroborated that GB is perceived more positively. Students tend to opt for British pronunciation because of 'geographical closeness' (120), and according to the research they choose the accent with which they have most experience. Furthermore, the participants shared their inclination towards native accents rather than towards non-native accents (the Austrian English accent), which were described as having lower status. They also

added that aiming to achieve native-like pronunciation is the ultimate goal. This is probably because of the fact that the majority of the participants studied to become teachers in the future (Dalton-Puffer et al. 115-126).

Nowacka from the University of Rzeszów conducted a study on Polish, Spanish and Italian university students. A significant number of the participants were students of the English language, pre-service teachers or students of the Humanities; of these, 69% strongly agreed that it is vital to be endowed with a fairly good pronunciation in English, and 89% strove for native-like pronunciation. When asked why they aspired to obtain a native-like accent, they responded that it is a way of demonstrating their competence as teachers (Nowacka 48-55). Nowacka therefore suggests that the outcome of her study ‘can serve as yet another argument for teaching native models of English’ (56).

In Belgium GB has traditionally been taught, but with the growing interest in American culture the role of GA in English teaching has had to be reconsidered. However, out of 107 university students of English only 4 would opt for the American accent, and 101 aimed towards GB (Ellen 1-6). The General British Pronunciation is again seen as ‘nicer, the most prestigious’ (7) and as it is ‘given the most importance’ (8) at Belgian universities and secondary schools it is perceived as the ‘norm’ among native accents (8). GA is only discussed during English lessons 10-30% of the time (8). When asked to give reasons for their aspiration towards a native-like accent, most answered that it is their ‘duty’ (7) as students of English. It is crucial to say that the level of English among people in Belgium is high, especially among young students of English, as it is used on a daily basis (such as in Belgian media or advertisements) (Ellen 2-3). Ellen adds that that is why obtaining native-like pronunciation is a way of ‘distinguishing themselves from skilled learners of English’ (7) and proving that they are ‘experts’ (7).

Similarly to Belgium, only the General British accent has traditionally been presented at schools in Denmark, but the influence of the United States has changed that. Nowadays,

about 15-20% of students of Copenhagen Business School who sign up for the phonetics course decide to focus on GA rather than GB (Jarvella et al. 40). Jarvella et al. also investigated the aesthetic judgements of the students. It comes as no surprise that the English speaker was judged most favourably, the second place was taken by the Scottish accent, followed by the Irish and the American one. Surprisingly, the American speaker was rated rather negatively, which was not expected as GA tends to score high on the solidarity level (45-48).

In China research has tackled the notion of standard and non-standard accent in English. Fang confirms that the standard ideology continues to be such a deep-rooted conviction that the majority (71.2%) of university students are dissatisfied with their accent in English as it does not resemble the standard (GB or GA), because it represents 'the Chinese style' or because it is simply 'unclear' (Fang, *An Investigation of Attitudes* 146). Moreover, almost 80% would like to sound like a native speaker, however a few respondents showed a different perspective regarding their accent in English. Some respondents highlighted the fact that being a Chinese person inevitably means accented speech and expressed no shame in connection with foreign-accentedness. They also emphasised the importance of intelligibility rather than of sounding like a native when speaking English (Fang, *An Investigation of Attitudes* 147). The importance of intelligibility has been gaining more and more attention, and we can also observe the shift in students' perception of accents. Yet should the students be mistaken for native speakers, most of them would feel 'wonderful' and 'quite happy' (Fang, *An Investigation of Attitudes* 150). As the varieties of native accents go, GB was again described as 'formal and authentic' (Fang, *Investigating attitudes* 72) whereas GA was believed to be more popular. However, the American accent was preferred, which is most probably influenced by geographical proximity (Fang, *Investigating attitudes* 72).

### 1.3.1.2 Local context

In the Czech Republic, interest in accent attitudes was initiated by Quinn Novotná's research back in 2012. Two influential studies regarding accent attitudes followed: the first was conducted on pre-service English teachers, whereas the second dealt with students who did not study English. The findings of both indicate that students aspire to achieve native-like pronunciation: among pre-service teachers the number reaches 96% (Lancová and Poesová, *Accent of One's Own* 85), while non-linguistic students also valued the native-like pronunciation quite highly – over 70% aimed towards native-like accents (Brabcová and Skarnitzl 48). The latter study once again confirmed the prevalent choice of GB among students, the many reasons for this including 'prestige, sophistication and elegance' (Brabcová and Skarnitzl 48). In addition, Brabcová and Skarnitzl also noticed that those students whose accent is almost native-like feel more satisfied with their English (48). The results of Lancová and Poesová's study hint at the ambivalence of pre-service teachers' accent attitudes. While the respondents expressed a desire to obtain native-like pronunciation, they also believed that it is vital to be understood, and that having fairly accented speech is normal, which mirrors the English as a Lingua Franca<sup>7</sup> (ELF) approach (Lancová and Poesová, *Accent of One's Own* 83-85).

### 1.3.2 Accent attitudes among high school students

The following section focuses again on accent attitudes, mostly towards British and American accents, the respondents this time being high school students. The research aspired to discover the emotional qualities attached to each model, the general preference among

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<sup>7</sup> English as a Lingua Franca - 'the common language of choice among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds', however native speakers are not eliminated from the equation (Jenkins, *ELF: interpretations and attitudes* 200); it accentuates *intelligibility* and 'the ability to communicate successfully in international contexts.' (TEFL Equity Advocates)

students and the reasoning behind their choices. Firstly, research abroad will be examined, and then the focus will turn to local high schools.

### **1.3.2.1 International context**

Starting in Sweden, a 2017 study by Norman deals among other things with the emotional aspect of accent attitudes. Until 2011 the Swedish curriculum set inner circle accents as the standard for English lessons, i.e. students were to accommodate their English to one of the inner circle standards (Norman 5), which corresponds with the English as a Foreign Language<sup>8</sup> (EFL) approach to teaching English pronunciation. Nowadays, the approach towards accents in the English lesson has changed, which also mirrors the results of the survey. When asked whether they attempt to speak with an accent, 49% of students answered that they do not. Those who answered positively opted for an American accent while speaking (21%). This is not a surprising finding in the Swedish context, as according to other studies Swedes tend to incline towards the American accent in contrast to their geographic neighbours (see Mobärg 1999, Jarvella et al 2001). Furthermore, 60% of the secondary school students do think ‘a little bit’ about how they sound and what accent they use while speaking, mentioning that ‘some accents sound more professional than others... and that the British accent is perceived as the better one’ (Norman 16) or that the American accent sounds more ‘laid-back and not as proper’ (Norman 14). It is a fact that even though Swedish teenagers view the American accent as their accent of choice, they do think twice before using it in more professional settings. What plays the biggest role in the acquisition of an accent among these students is watching TV series and movies in English, which to some extent explains why Swedes favour the American accent. In general however, achieving native-like pronunciation is considered insignificant, only 17%

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<sup>8</sup> English as a Foreign Language – ‘the teaching of English to students whose first language is not English’ (Cambridge Dictionary); the native pronunciation (usually RP or GA) is seen as the goal for the students. (TEFL Equity Advocates)

finding it crucial to obtain a native-like accent. The students claimed that intelligibility is the most vital for them (88%) and that everyone should choose an accent they are 'comfortable with' (Norman 16). Having said that, it is quite surprising that up to 40% felt embarrassed about their accent, 24% also believed that they were treated as less intelligent because of their accent, and 36% of the students were convinced that they had been judged because of their accent. One student mentioned racial prejudices connected to a specific accent, others claimed that it is human and therefore normal to judge others. Some students also expressed unease when speaking with a Swedish accent. All in all, this proves that even though the students do not want to feel pressured to obtain native-like pronunciation and believe that intelligibility is vital, they still subconsciously perceive standard accents as the proper ones (Norman 12-20).

Another study conducted in Sweden comments on the perception of the likeability of British and American English accents. American and British accents were evaluated both positively and negatively. The negative words associated with the British English accent were 'snobbish or exaggerated' (Ledin 15), while the positive aspects mentioned were 'cosiness, pleasantness and the fact that the British vocabulary is better than the American vocabulary' (Ledin 15). When it comes to American English, the terms 'laziness and sounding slang' were attributed to American English, while on the other hand adjectives like 'cool, more relaxed, modern and nicer' were connected with this variant (Ledin 15).

Alftberg's 2009 research suggests that the status of British and American accents in Sweden is changing. In the past, British English was regarded as 'the golden standard' yet according to Alftberg, only 18.2% of students nowadays think that British English has a superior status, compared to a similar number of 15.2% who believe that American English is the one with higher status. Similarly to Ledin's study, British was viewed as 'too classy' yet by some as 'more important and not sounding too country like American English' (Alftberg 16-17). American English was described as 'easier to pronounce and making better movies'

(Alftberg 16-18). This suggests and confirms Mobärg's findings that 'there is empirical evidence showing a strong positive correlation between media preference and language attitudes' (Mobärg, RP or GA? 119). Alftenberg also confirmed Swedes' inclination towards American English; it therefore appears that Sweden's standard accent preference is rather stable, what is changing however is the attitude towards native-like accents. The students focus more on intelligibility than before, which follows the principles of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

In contrast to Sweden, 53% of Danish students express a preference for a British accent as their goal in English pronunciation (Ladegaard and Sachdev 101). In a 2006 study, not only were American and British standard accents studied, but the researchers also focused on the Cockney, Scottish and Australian accents. What remains unchanged in both Danish and Swedish contexts is the notion of GB being 'the most prestigious accent and correct' (Ladegaard and Sachdev 100). Moreover, the speaker of GB was attributed more intelligence and fluency. However, the American, Scottish and Australian accents were rated more positively on the scale of friendliness, helpfulness and reliability. The Cockney accent was presented rather negatively, which matches Sachdev et al.'s research (1998). The prevalence of American culture was also observed. What needs to be emphasised about this study is that the respondents also included undergraduate students, but since the majority were secondary school students, this is presented as a high school study.

Moving further from Europe, Japan may be mentioned in connection with General American English. According to Geller 2007, American English is 'the mainstream variety' (3) in Japan. There are countless schools whose advertising is based on the 'We teach American English' slogan (Gathright 24). It comes as no surprise that GA is the preferred choice for Japanese students because of the geographic proximity to the USA. The economic, political and cultural relationship with the USA is very strong and the students therefore view GA to be the

most advantageous for them to acquire (Fukuda 225). Fukuda's 2010 research confirmed the preference for GA among Japanese high school students and stated that according to both teachers and learners of English, American English is simply 'more international' (Fukuda 224).

Another study in Japan explored the perception of the Inner and Outer circles of English among Japanese high school students. When asked whether they would be interested in the Englishes of Singapore and India, the majority refused this possibility. Many respondents were surprised at the term Singaporean or Indian English and showed low interest in the accents. Matsuda points out that there are probably no negative attitudes towards outer circle varieties as such, but that the students are not well educated when it comes to other varieties apart from GA and GB. Indeed, 84% of students still regard GA and GB as the golden standard of pronunciation (Matsuda 489-490).

### **1.3.2.2 Local context**

In comparison with foreign countries, research in the Czech Republic is in its beginnings, especially in terms of studies carried out at Czech high schools. To my best knowledge, only Güttnarová and Jakšič with Šturm have devoted their attention to accent attitudes among high school students in the Czech Republic. Jakšič and Šturm's research aimed to present a general profile of a Czech high school student and not only deals with accent attitudes but also with the ability of pupils to recognise different variations of the English language. Their results confirmed the strong position of American culture in the Czech Republic and its influence on young students, while on the other hand visits to English-speaking countries were dominated by the United Kingdom. Although the preference of GA and GB was equal among the students, the perception of prestige was unequivocally attributed to the latter. The participants of the study were also asked to indicate where they would like to live for five years:

the results showed symmetry in the students' accent of choice and location for living (Jakšič and Šturm 360-361).

Güttnerová's thesis examined various age groups, but the majority of subjects were high school students. The results show that the majority uses English to communicate with non-native speakers and would appreciate non-native accents being included in their English lessons. Furthermore, the majority believes that accent plays an important role in a speaker's identity; however, as for themselves, they do not regard it as vital to obtain a native-like accent. Nevertheless, native accents are still placed on a pedestal for sounding more professional and trustworthy. When it comes to evaluation of non-native accents, the results suggest that the more familiar the students are with an accent, the less negatively prejudiced they tend to be. However, as Güttnerová states, there are many more aspects to be considered regarding negative prejudices (tone, personal affiliation etc.) (Güttnerová 56-75).

### **1.3.3 Conclusion**

To conclude, the adherence to standard continues to be strong, however students view intelligibility as more and more important. Both in the international and Czech contexts, a preference for the General British accent has been observed and confirmed in the majority of the studies. However, there are some exceptions: Japan, Sweden and China showed an inclination towards the American accent. The British accent is seen as 'the original, the correct, the prestigious, the aristocratic or the elegant' one whereas the American accent is praised for being 'modern, cool, friendlier or easier to produce'. Taking the results of the mentioned studies into consideration, it can be observed that geographical proximity, historical context and the economic and social status of the country play a significant role in the students' choice of an accent. Even though the accent attitudes of learners of English are developing, the majority of

students still believe the standard accents to be the most correct ones, and evaluate non-native accents less positively (See Chapter 2 – Accent Discrimination).

## **2 Accent discrimination**

Some findings from the previously mentioned research studies on accent attitudes hinted at accent discrimination or accentism, which the Macmillan Dictionary defines as ‘prejudice or discrimination against someone because of the way they speak, write or communicate.’ (Marchenko). The individuals who experienced accentism were treated as less intelligent and less professional, they were unfairly judged and, in some cases, even bullied because of their pronunciation (Parveen). In countries like Canada, Austria or Australia, ‘Language analysis’ is used to determine the place of origin of the asylum seeker. However, the linguists appointed by the government do not always obey the ethical codex and are not always ‘linguistically trained’ and may use ‘unreliable methods’ (Derwing and Murray, *Pronunciation Fundamentals* 133). Eades mentions a common mistake among immigration reports in Australia – the asylum seeker was mistakenly assessed to be Pakistani because of pronouncing many words with a Pakistani accent. However, the speaker was escaping the civil war in Afghanistan and their accent was influenced by having been in contact with many Pakistanis. Similar cases have been observed in New Zealand and have in some cases led to the refusal of asylum (Eades 510-511).

Accent discrimination has been given a lot of attention recently but it certainly is not an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dating as far back as to the Bible, the Gileadites would recognize an Ephramite based on their pronunciation of the word ‘Shibboleth’. A Gileadite would naturally pronounce this word with a ‘sh’ at the beginning of the word, but an Ephramite would reveal his identity by saying ‘Sibboleth’, which would eventually lead to his death (Derwing and Murray, *Pronunciation Fundamentals* 132).

Linguistic discrimination can be observed among other languages too, such as Spanish or French. In Spain, ‘castellano’ – the official language of Spain – is perceived as the standard form, and other variations such as Andalusian Spanish or Latin American Spanish carry the burden of not being the ‘Cervantes noble Spanish’ (Benítez). Similarly, the southern accent of the French people is by some considered as less standard. However, the French Assemblée Nationale has decided to make glottophobie (the new French word for accentism) illegal, just like racism or sexism (Willsher). Accentism occurs worldwide and continues to be researched. This chapter will firstly examine accent discrimination among native speakers of English, and then explore the prejudices against accented speech.

### **2.1.1 Accent discrimination among native speakers**

The fact that accent discrimination also appears among native speakers may be seen as slightly surprising by non-natives however, examples of accentism can even be observed in one of G.B.Shaw’s most significant works ‘Pygmalion’, where a Cockney girl is forced to transform her unsatisfactory accent into Received Pronunciation<sup>9</sup> so as to be respected by the upper class. Shaw’s words from the preface of Pygmalion therefore serve as a fitting introduction to this part. ‘It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him.’ (Shaw 1).

The UK offers a wide variety of accents – there are around 56 accents to be found. Received Pronunciation is still viewed as the standard even though only 2% of speakers really speak it. RP scores best on the intelligence scale but lacks when it comes to friendliness. The accents of Devon or Edinburgh are on the other hand perceived as friendlier than RP. This is a

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<sup>9</sup> Received Pronunciation refers to a regionally non-specific way of pronouncing British English and is thus used in this part of the thesis instead of GB which can be regionally specific (Robinson; Hudson).

similar result to the perception of GB vs GA, that is to say, regional and ‘non-standard’ accents are ascribed higher levels of solidarity (McGowan Transcriptions).

Even though all humans possess cognitive biases, which ‘help process the world quickly’ (Levon et al. 6), and such thoughts are inevitable, a problem arises when they are considered as valid aids to determine people’s personalities. People who experience accent bias unfortunately do not have a legitimate claim to be protected by law. The UK’s Equality Act 2010 penalises acts of racism and offers protection on the basis of ethnicity or social class, but unfortunately does not cover the burning issue of accent discrimination (Levon et al. 5-7). Some 80% of employers confessed to making decisions regarding the hiring process based on the level of accentedness in speech, but ‘only’ 28% believe they have been discriminated against because of their accent (McGowan Transcriptions; Marshall). A 2020 study conducted by the Universities of London and York concluded that the accent attitudes towards British accents have not significantly changed – RP is still seen as the most prestigious, whereas ‘urban working-class and ethnic minority accents’ are ascribed ‘less prestige’ (Levon et al. 14). On the bright side however, the project shows that people are more aware of these attitudes and are therefore able to resist them (Levon et al. 14).

Generally, when the British public deals with the topic of accent bias, the Northern accents come to mind. Baratta has been drawing attention to accent discrimination among teachers in the UK. The teachers had to face offensive comments regarding their pronunciation and were forced to adapt their pronunciation to the RP standard. Strong regional accents (particularly Northern ones) were perceived as ‘incompatible with teacher’s professional identity’ by the teachers’ mentors (Baratta et al. 11). Stigmatising regional accents ‘involves a loss of self’ (12) for the teacher and gives the students an impression that being themselves is not the right approach (Baratta et al. 10-15). Unfortunately, the influence of the standardised approach to pronunciation can be observed among students too. According to a Guardian

investigation, university students have been mocked because of their regional accents not only by their peers but also by members of academic staff. Some mention that the comments were so aggressive that they would not participate in a class discussion despite wanting to (Parveen). The stigma surrounding Northern accents is being discussed very frequently but according to many studies, some of the most stigmatised accents are to be found in south-east England (Essex, Cockney speakers.). East London and southern Essex speakers are seen as less intelligent and overall are perceived more negatively (see Cole et al.).

### **2.1.2 Accent discrimination towards non-native accents**

Accent discrimination towards non-native accents has received a lot of attention in recent years. A very common place where accentism occurs is the workplace. It is not unusual to not be given a promotion based on your accented speech, your regional accent being called ‘a handicap’ (157) and being recommended ‘professional help to get rid of it’ (157) (Lippi-Green 156-173). Indian call centre workers are also commonly discriminated against because of their accent, but when client interactions are positive, the employee accent has no effect on the perception of the speaker. Conversely, when the outcome is negative, accent bias plays a significant role. In the case of call centres, the review of the worker is negatively affected, the workers experience vulgarities towards their accent and are forced to take part in speech training programmes (Wang et al. 4.4).

Similarly, accentism also concerns language teachers. ‘Native teachers only’ is quite frequently a part of the marketing of many schools, and for many teaching jobs only natives are being recruited, which suggests that second language (L2) speakers are less suitable for the job of an English teacher (Llurda and Moussu 316). However, as Derwing and Munro stress, there are more vital aspects when it comes to a good English teacher – ‘proficiency in the language, sufficient metalinguistic knowledge, strong pedagogical skills and a clear understanding of the

contexts in which the students will use the L2' (Derwing and Munro, *Pronunciation Fundamentals* 137-138).

When it comes to the perception of non-native accents among natives and non-natives, the results show interesting outcomes. In a 2012 study on Americanism and the attitudes towards non-native accents, it was shown that speakers with strongly accented speech were evaluated much more negatively than those with mildly accented speech or native speakers. According to this research, Americans are less likely to engage in social activities with speakers with strongly accented pronunciation. This should therefore serve as a warning for teachers, as such speakers may be 'at risk of being excluded from the activities' (29) (Goering 25-36).

On the other hand, when non-native speakers (Spaniards) were asked to assess non-native accents, there were no extreme negative attitudes towards any of the non-native accents mentioned; French, German, Polish, Chinese and Spanish Englishes were investigated. According to the results, the German and Polish accents were evaluated most positively, French and Spanish Englishes were perceived more negatively. Chinese English was rated as 'being easy to understand' (Benzies 47) but an English teacher with such an accent would not be strongly preferred. The participants were Law and Tourism students, which also affected the results: Law students showed an inclination towards having a native English teacher, but Tourism students preferred both (Benzies 39-55). That is probably because of the fact that Tourism students are well aware of many different accents, have experience with World Englishes, and are used to them.

To conclude, accentism is to be found in all spheres of life – including in the workplace or schools – and affects both non-native and native speakers. Linguists propose that 'raising awareness is likely to be the most effective strategy' (Levon et al 22).

## PRACTICAL PART<sup>10</sup>

The aim of the practical part is to examine high school students' attitudes and beliefs about native and non-native accents, with respect to their own accent and the students' perception of their teachers' accent. The following text scrutinises the results of a questionnaire survey conducted at three Czech high schools, and its aim is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the students' preference regarding native and non-native accents like?
- 2) What is the students' pronunciation goal?
- 3) What is the degree of satisfaction with one's own accent?
- 4) How do the students perceive their English teachers' accents?

### 3 Method

The data were elicited from a questionnaire (see Appendix) which was distributed to the students of the first and fourth years of three different grammar schools – two regional schools and one Prague high school. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. After each part, there was a comments section, where the respondents could share their experience and opinions. The first section gathered general information regarding the students' gender, school, level in English and a brief Second language acquisition autobiography (SLA). The second part, titled *Accent & me*, consisted of 12 questions and explored the students' attitudes to their own accent and accents in general. The last part, *Accent & teachers*, examined the students' perception of their teachers' accents and comprised 5 questions. The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed questions and therefore combines both qualitative and quantitative data.

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<sup>10</sup> Note: All the percentage numbers have been rounded.

### 3.1 Preparation of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was inspired by that created by Poesová and Lancová (Accent of One's Own). It was divided into the same three parts and also explored the students' self-evaluation and satisfaction with their own accents, types of exposure to the English language, and the students' views on the importance of native-like accents in teachers. Thus, some questions shared certain similarities, and questions 12, 13, 18 and 33 were almost or completely identical. Questions on the students' relationship to English and other foreign languages were added, followed by questions on the frequency of exposure to English and the students' goals regarding pronunciation. Lastly, the students' perception of the degree of accentedness in their teachers' speech was explored.

The questionnaire was initially designed in Microsoft Word, and subsequently transferred into Google Forms. Four high school students participated in the piloting process – two students from the first year and two students from the fourth year of grammar school. The students received a shared link for a Google Document where they were supposed to answer a few questions after having finished the questionnaire. They were asked about the time needed for the completion, lexis they were unsure about or did not understand properly, and questions which may have been perceived as ambiguous or unclear. The students needed five to eight minutes to complete the questionnaire, and the actual respondents were thus informed about the approximate time required to fill in the questionnaire (10 minutes). Furthermore, the students expressed uncertainty over the word *scarcely*, which is why the English equivalent 'not often' was added. One respondent also experienced slight difficulties with the expression 'your favourite non-native accent' as she was not sure what was meant by the term, and on that account examples of non-native accents of English were given to ensure that everybody would understand. Lastly, Q24 was translated into Czech, as the students were confused with the

sentence in English. Before finalising the questionnaire, all their comments were incorporated to make the completion of the survey as student-friendly as possible.

### **3.2 Procedure**

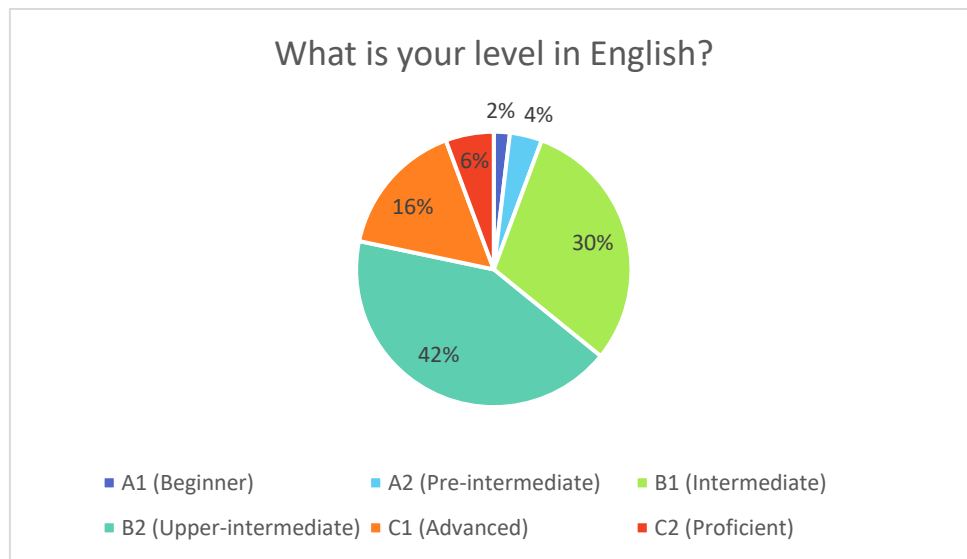
After the questionnaire was finished, it was sent to five teachers who helped with its distribution. Because of the pandemic, everything had to be administered online. The students received an electronic link and were asked by their teachers to complete it. All the instructions needed were to be found in the introductory box of the online survey. The students were informed that the questionnaire consisted of no ‘right or wrong’ questions, and that all the information disclosed would be kept confidential. The questionnaire was administered from the 11<sup>th</sup> March to the 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021. After it was concluded, the results were analysed and visualised in Microsoft Excel. The response rate reached 71%.

### **3.3 Respondents**

The total number of respondents that completed the survey was 107, and only two of the participants were native speakers (both from Prague). There was a slight predominance of females (59%) among the respondents, the men answer rate being 38%. In terms of class assessment, 56% were students of the first year of grammar school, the rest of the fourth year (44%). Slightly more than half of the participants (56%) attended the Prague school, the rest (44%) the two regional schools. Both of the regional schools offer either German or French as a second foreign language. The situation in the Prague school is different. It must be mentioned that the Prague school focuses on language studies: the students attend mandatory Latin lessons for four years and as their second foreign language they can choose from Spanish, German and French. This was reflected in the questionnaire results as follows: the students from the capital claimed more experience with long-term stays abroad and language learning, and also

participated more in the comments section of the questionnaire. Other differences between the Prague and the regional schools were not observed.

In regard to language proficiency (students' self-assessment using CEFR<sup>11</sup>), the majority of the respondents (42%) evaluated their level as B2, the other most frequent levels were B1 and C1 (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Respondents' self-assessed language level in English according to CEFR (n=107)

The language experience of the students is the last part to be described. In this study, language experience is characterised by the students' exposure to English accents and their stays abroad in English-speaking countries, which were defined as lasting more than one month. Only 8% have travelled to English-speaking countries (the USA and Canada) for more than one month. In terms of exposure to English accents, a vast majority of the students are in touch with English on a daily basis. They mostly communicate in English online or at school, and their most frequent communication partners are both native and non-native speakers. Only 9%

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<sup>11</sup> CEFR – The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

communicate with native speakers only, 35% interact with non-native speakers only, and 13% do not speak in English outside school at all.

## 4 Results

The first aim of the study was to provide a description of high school students' own accent attitudes. Secondly, the survey focuses on the students' beliefs about their teachers' accents. The results chapter will thus be divided into three parts – 'Accent & me' and 'Accent & teachers', followed by additional students' comments on the topic.

### 4.1 Accent & me

In this part, the students' language experience and accent attitudes are described. A vast majority of the respondents reported their liking for foreign languages learning. The most popular second foreign language choice was German, followed by Spanish and French. Concerning their relationship towards English, 85% have a positive attitude towards the English language. There was no response for a strong dislike towards English (See Figure 2).

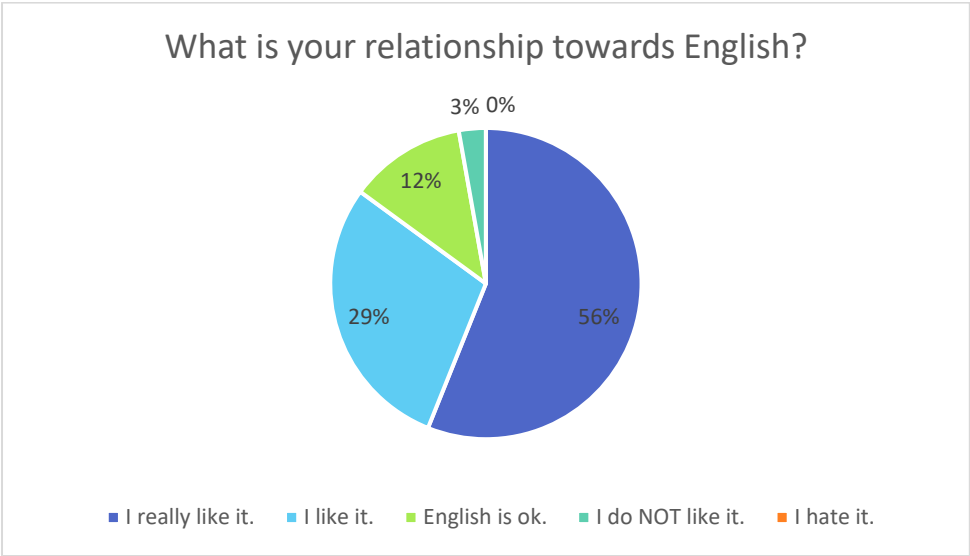
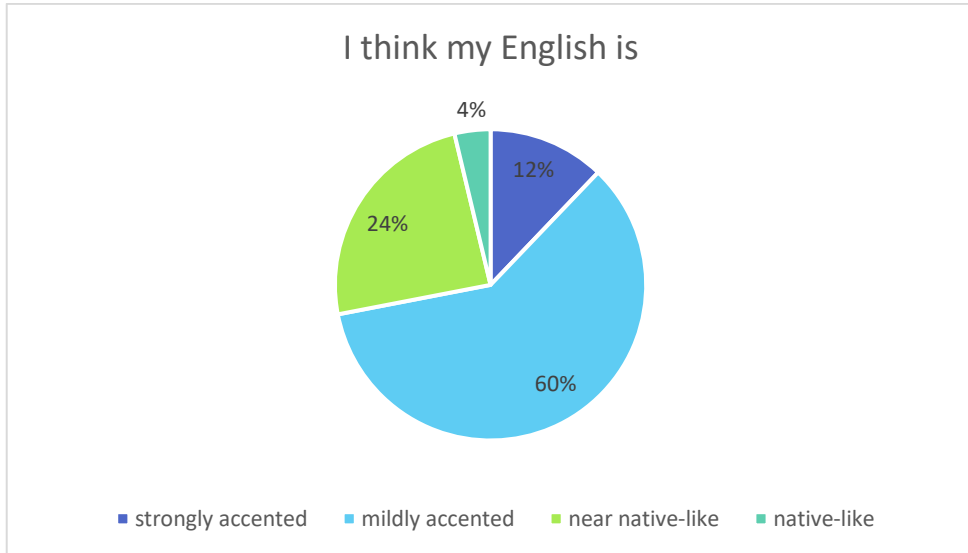


Figure 2 Respondents' relationship towards English (n=107)

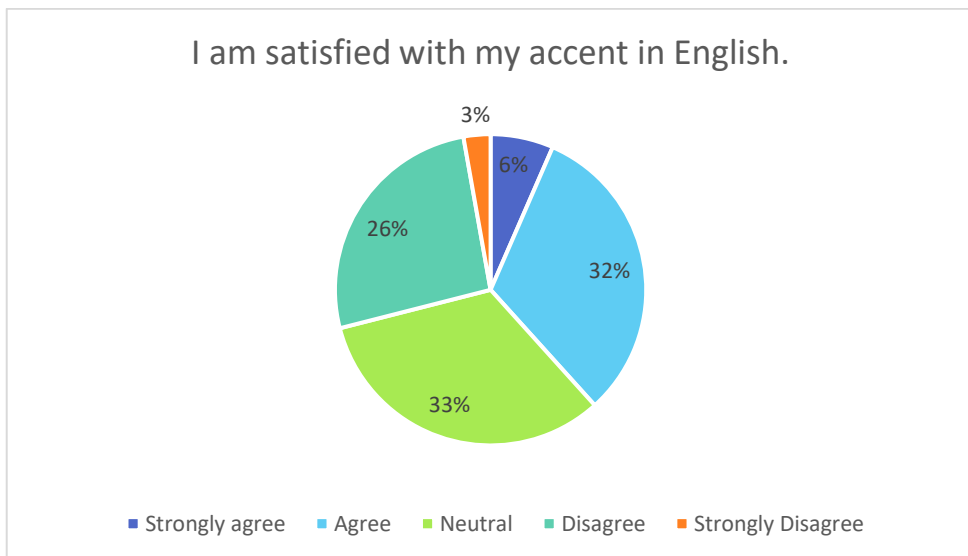
Regarding the participants' pronunciation goal in English, the students divided into halves, with 48% striving for a native-like accent while an identical number of respondents value intelligibility particularly highly and do not mind sounding a little bit foreign. Only one person claimed not to care about English pronunciation at all. Two of the respondents were native speakers and they had thus already achieved their pronunciation goals. One of the respondents commented that their goal is 'not to sound stupid'. Furthermore, the majority of the students agreed that if they had a more native-like accent, they would feel more confident while speaking. When asked if they have a pronunciation role model, 69% answered negatively. Of those who responded affirmatively, the greatest source of influence were actors, with the predominance of the British accent. Not surprisingly, the second place was taken by the American accent and this was followed by the Irish accent. One respondent expressed a wish to sound like an English-speaking Indian. Others stated that they are inspired to sound like their English teacher, their classmate or their favourite singer or YouTuber. What the results show is that almost one third of the participants think about their pronunciation to the extent that they know exactly what they would ideally want to sound like. This may work as a significant source of motivation for the students.

In terms of the respondents' self-evaluation of their accent, 60% view their English as mildly accented. Surprisingly, 28% perceive their pronunciation to be near native-like or native-like. Only 12% evaluate their English as strongly accented (see Figure 3). In terms of students' satisfaction with their pronunciation, 38% are satisfied with their accent, 33% have a neutral view of their pronunciation and 29% are dissatisfied with their accent (see Figure 4). Even though 60% (64 respondents) rate their English as mildly accented, only 33% of the 64 respondents are satisfied with their English (satisfied = 'strongly agree' and 'agree' answers). On the contrary, of the participants who described their speech as

*strongly accented*, 30% expressed satisfaction with their English (satisfaction = ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ answers) (see Figure 5)



**Figure 3** Self-perceived evaluation of students' accent (n=107)



**Figure 4** Satisfaction of one's accent (n=107)

<i>Sense of satisfaction</i> →	<i>Fully satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Unsatisfied</i>
<b>Self-perceived accent strength</b> ↓				
Native-like	2	2	0	0
Near native-like	3	9	9	5
Mild	1	20	26	17
Strong	1	3	0	9

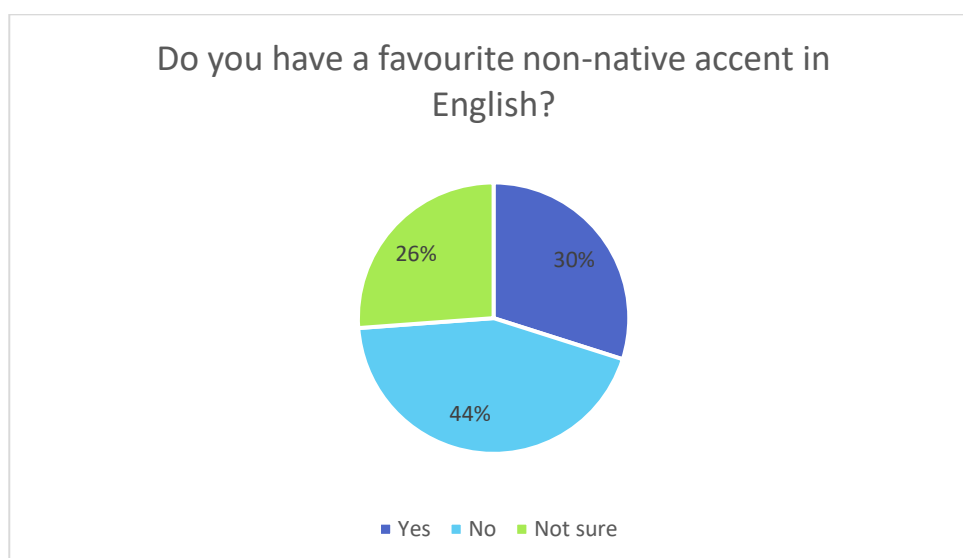
**Figure 5** The relationship between self-perceived accent strength and sense of satisfaction (n=107) (Note. Unsatisfied = ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ answers)

Having determined the goal of the students’ pronunciation, the most significant influences on their accent should be mentioned. According to the replies (multiple choice question), the most influential type of exposure to English accents is watching movies or TV series (77%). The second place is occupied by watching videos on platforms like YouTube (73%), followed by listening to music (52%). Furthermore, the students’ pronunciation is substantially shaped by their school English teacher (51%), by playing computer games (19%) or by their private English teachers (12%). Other influences mentioned were: ‘speaking in English to myself’, ‘my host mum in the UK’, ‘listening to the news’, ‘my classmate’ or ‘talking in English with natives’.

The students’ model preference is not surprising: in all, 39% labelled GB as their favourite accent and 36% opted for GA. The third place was taken by Canadian English and Scottish English, followed by the Australian and Irish accents. One student responded that they are not familiar with the differences between the accents proposed in the multiple choice question. Another answered as not having any favourites. Two respondents claimed never to have thought

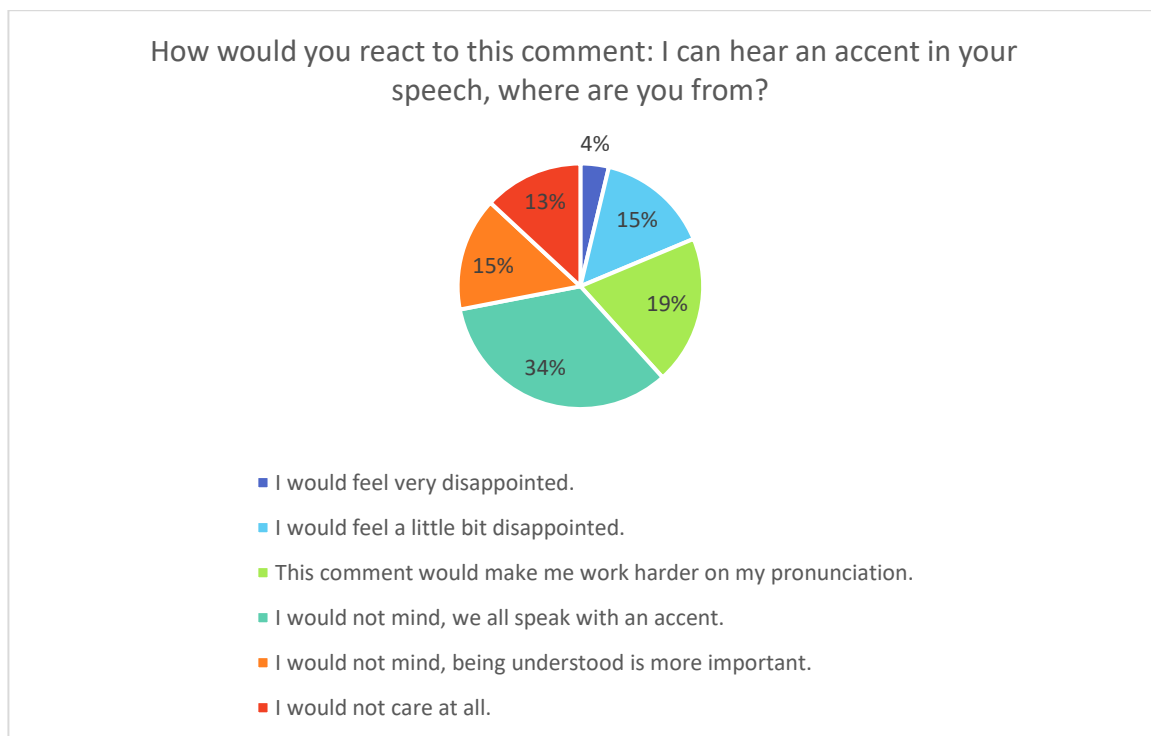
of their favourite accent. Moreover, one person expressed their preference for the South African accent, and respondent number 14 stated that they enjoyed both GA and GB. A difference can be observed between local schools and the Prague school: the students from Prague seem to be somewhat more aware of other varieties of native accents than their peers from regional schools. In the local schools, the respondents were acquainted with the British, American, Canadian and Australian accents; the Prague students also added the Scottish, Irish and South African accents.

As far as non-native accents are concerned, the results showed that 30% of the students have a favourite non-native accent (see Figure 6). The most popular non-native accents proved to be Russian English (9 respondents), followed by French English (6 respondents). The third place was taken by both Spanish English and German-accented English (both 5 respondents). Among the other favourite non-native accents mentioned were Japanese, Korean, Icelandic, Swedish, Italian and Indian English. Czech-accented English also appeared in the list but demonstrated a dichotomous relationship: while one respondent marked Czech-accented English as their favourite, another claimed ‘to despise Czech-accented English’.



**Figure 6** Students' favourite non-native accents (n=107 respondents)

In the last question of the section ‘Accent & me’, the participants’ reactions to the following comment were explored: ‘I can hear an accent, where are you from?’ (see Figure 7). Firstly, 19% expressed a feeling of strong or mild disappointment which might signal a strong desire to achieve native-like pronunciation. Secondly, 19% exhibited a sense of extrinsic motivation upon hearing the comment. Thirdly, 34% demonstrated a great deal of acceptance of their own foreign accentedness, i.e. the respondents would feel relaxed and not bothered should they hear such a comment. The next group comprised 15% and the respondents would not mind the comment as they view intelligibility as crucial. Lastly, 13% would feel indifferent, possibly suggesting that they do not care about their pronunciation at all.

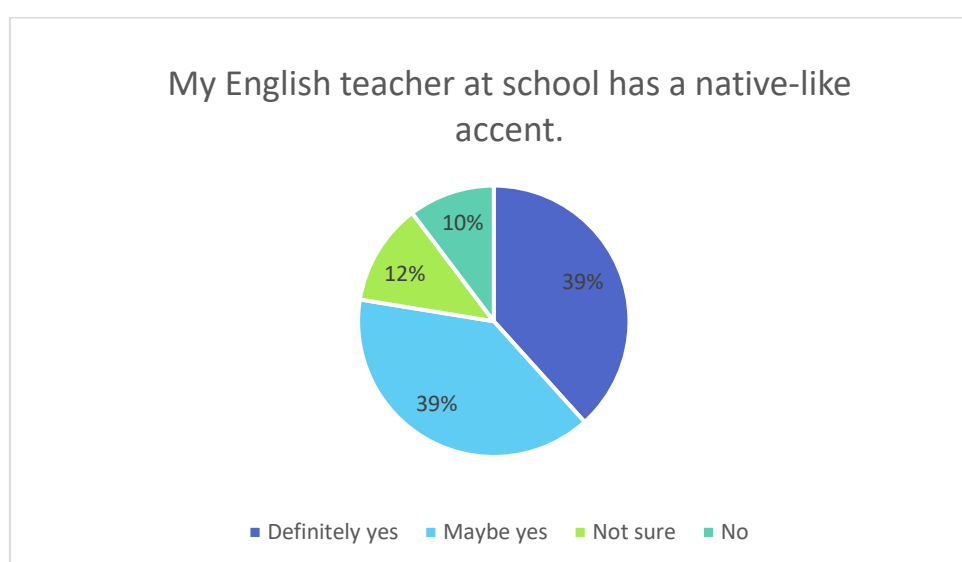


**Figure 7** Reactions to the following comment were explored: ‘I can hear an accent, where are you from?’ (n=107 respondents)

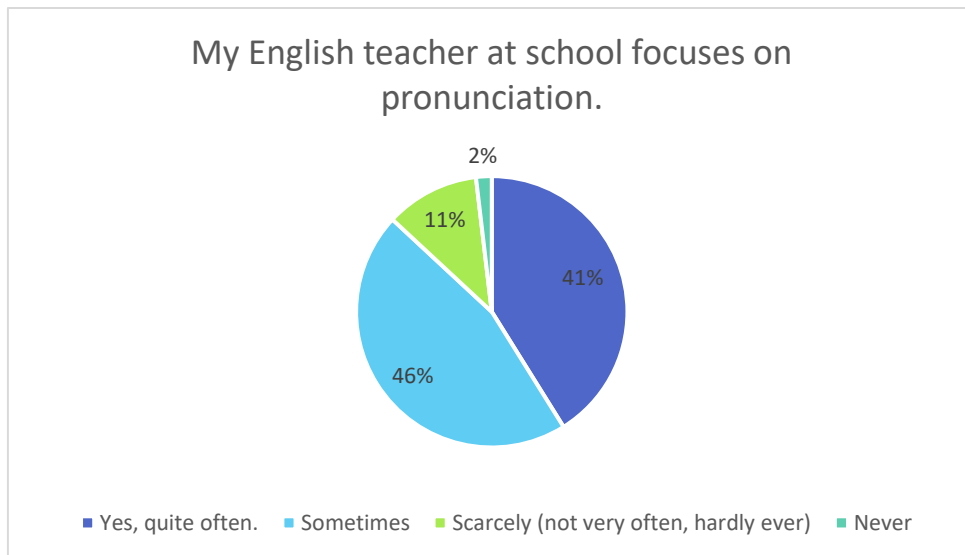
## 4.2 Accent & teachers

The following text will reflect the students' opinions on the importance of accent in their teachers. According to the results of the study, 84% believe that English teachers ought to have a native-like accent. On the other hand, 15% see pronunciation in teachers as not important. One respondent stated that as long as 'pronunciation is not harmed, they do not care'. Comparing these results to reality in the respondents' English lessons, only 10% report that their teacher does not have a native-like accent, and 39% claim that their teacher *definitely* has a native-like accent (see Figure 8).

Concerning the focus on pronunciation in the students' lessons, 87% said that their teachers often or sometimes tackle the topic of pronunciation. Only 2% said that their teachers never shifted their attention to pronunciation (see Figure 9). A correlation has been found between the teachers who were described as not having a native-like accent and teachers who *scarcely* or *never* deal with pronunciation: 73% of teachers whose accent was evaluated as foreign-accented also do not focus on pronunciation during their lessons.

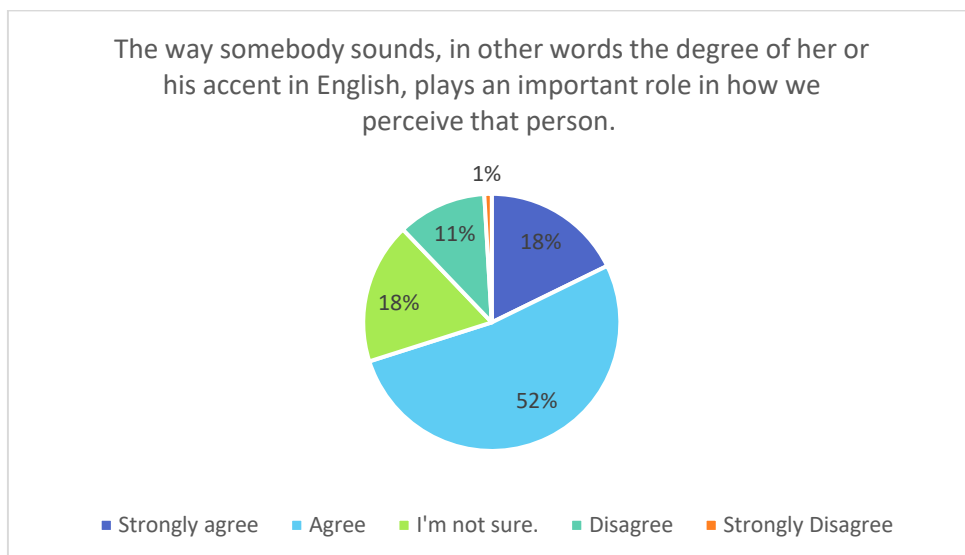


**Figure 8** The evaluation of teachers' pronunciation according to the students (n=107)



**Figure 9** Teachers' focus on pronunciation according to the students (n=107)

When asked whether the degree of a speaker's accentedness plays an important role in how the speaker is perceived, the majority of the respondents agreed. Only 12% disagreed (see Figure 10).



**Figure 10** The effects of accentedness on listeners' perceptions (n=107)

The following question mirrors the previous one and focuses on the choice between two new English teachers – one with a near native-like accent and the other with accented but understandable speech. The students were given the possibility to choose one. It was found that 55% would opt for the teacher with a near native-like pronunciation, while 35% would not focus on the teacher’s pronunciation, but would rather be interested in their other qualities such as personality or pedagogical skills. Only 6% would choose the teacher with accented yet understandable speech. Some of the participants expressed their equal interest in both dimensions – teaching skills and pronunciation. One respondent shared their wish as follows ‘I just want a teacher who does not sound like a Google translator.’. Another student stated that they would probably choose a teacher with a near native-like accent, but would also consider other factors, while yet another emphasised that ‘pronunciation is important but certainly not everything.’ Moreover, 73% of the students who strive for native-like pronunciation would choose the teacher with near native-like pronunciation. Interestingly, out of those who do not reckon that native-like pronunciation is important in teachers, 38% would still choose the teacher with a near native-like accent.

### **4.3 Additional comments**

The research survey gathered interesting experience and opinions on the topic of accent attitudes. In this section, individual comments will be presented and commented on.

Starting with the students’ role model regarding pronunciation, the results showed a large variety of people. As has already been stated, the majority of the role models mentioned consisted of actors. However, not all of them represent ‘mainstream’ favourite actors and their accents, like Emma Watson or Tom Holland. One respondent mentioned Rex Harrison as their goal of pronunciation, adding the following: *‘I would like to sound like Rex Harrison in My Fair Lady movie. I love those lines like ‘The rain in Spain...’ etc. I found it so funny to repeat*

*after him, focusing on pronunciation.*’ This comment shows not only the student’s clear idea of what they would like to sound like, but also emphasises the fact that Harrison’s accent has the power to motivate the individual to practise their pronunciation.

Another respondent voiced his wish as follows: *‘I would like to speak like the queen. I mean really... my goal is to learn to speak in RP, however I know it is not so common even between Londoners, so if I were to visit London, I would like to sound like Emma Watson, Judi Dench or Ian McKellen.’* The fact that the respondent is familiar with the term RP and its characteristics suggests greater knowledge than expected.

Participant number 23 states that she would appreciate learning more about accents, even in theory: *‘I am a perfectionist so I would like to improve my accent as much as possible and also it is quite difficult to impersonate someone without knowing their accents. I would generally love to learn more about accents also as a linguistic theory.’*

The last comment to be mentioned regarding pronunciation goals emphasises the preference towards native accents: *‘Speaking like Chandler or Monica from Friends would not be bad or Daniel Radcliffe, gosh I love his accent. Or Rupert Grint’s or Tom Felton’s. Okay, speaking like ANY of the native speakers would be great.’*

Last but not least, the comments also revolved around the students’ teachers. The following comments show the influential power teachers have on their students – both positive and negative. *‘My English teacher speaks perfect RP, is sure about his level of proficiency and loves the language. I absolutely admire his skills and am inspired to reach his level of English.’*; this respondent also commented on the importance of native-like pronunciation in teachers: *‘I do believe that pronunciation is a key part of a language (can you imagine French without the right pronunciation?) and therefore teachers should sound native-like.’*

Unfortunately, teachers can also affect their students negatively. An example being this comment from respondent number 35: *‘It was my very first high school English teacher who*

*destroyed my confidence in native-like speaking skills 😞. Very sad times. However, my current English teacher is rather good. My confidence is slowly returning to me and I'm starting to use my original British accent again. Yay!'*

#### **4.4 Discussion**

To conclude, the previously determined research questions will be answered and compared with published studies.

##### *1) What is the students' preference regarding native and non-native accents like?*

Similarly to Jakšič and Šturm's findings, the students showed almost equal preference for the British (39%) and American accent (36%). The rest of the answers (25%) comprised Canadian English, Scottish English, Australian, Irish and South African English. The third most favourite accent turned out to be Canadian English with Scottish English, followed by the Australian and Irish accents. One respondent added South African English to the list as their accent of choice. Having said that, it can be stated that the students' preference and awareness does not revolve only around the most typical native accents - GB and GA - but also involves the more 'marginal' ones.

Moving to non-native accents, both the students from regional schools and the Prague school showed a relatively broad knowledge of non-native accents. Of 107 participants, 30% have a favourite non-native accent. The most frequent response was Russian English, followed by French English in second place, and German and Spanish English in third place. Other accents mentioned were Japanese English, Korean English, Icelandic English, Swedish English, Italian and Indian English.

### *2) What is the students' pronunciation goal?*

The results indicated two main goals – a native-like accent and the importance of intelligibility. It was found that 48% aim towards a native-like accent, while the same amount of students want to be understood, and sounding a little bit foreign does not cause them worries. Only one person does not care at all about pronunciation. Moreover, the majority agree that having a more native-like accent adds to one's confidence while speaking.

When it comes to the pronunciation role models of the respondents, the first place was taken by actors, followed by favourite singers and YouTubers, English teachers or classmates. In terms of what or who influenced the students most in their pronunciation, the most frequent answer was watching movies or TV series in English, which aligns with Jakšič and Šturm's findings. Watching videos on platforms like YouTube, listening to music or playing computer games were mentioned among other influences on students' accents.

### *3) What is the degree of satisfaction with one's own accent?*

Overall, it can be said that only 38% are satisfied with their accent, and 29% are not content with it. The rest of the respondents expressed a neutral relationship towards their accent. What the results show is that even if the students rated their accent as 'mildly accented', they were not satisfied with it. Out of those who labelled their accent as 'mild', only 33% were happy with their accent. Of the respondents who considered their accent to be 'native-like' or 'near native-like', only 17% were fully satisfied. These findings contradict Lancová and Poesová's results, as in their study, the students who described their accent as mild were also mostly satisfied with it (Lancová and Poesová, Cause for Optimism 104).

*4) How do the students perceive their English teachers' accents?*

Most of the participants believe that English teachers ought to have native-like pronunciation. Only 15% see their teachers' accent as unimportant. In addition, 70% agree that one's accentedness plays a vital role in how the individual is perceived, which agrees with Güttnerová's results. In real life, should the students be offered two new English teachers – one with a near native-like accent, the other with accented yet understandable speech – 55% of respondents would opt for the one with a near-native like accent, only 6% would choose the one with accented yet understandable speech, and 35% would not focus on the teacher's accent but would rather value their personality and pedagogical skills. The rest mentioned the importance of both aspects.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical part of this thesis examined the notion of attitudes and provided an overview of studies conducted both in the Czech Republic and abroad. Secondly, it also tackled the topic of accent discrimination. The aim of the practical part was to create a profile of high school students' accent attitudes and to establish how students regard the extent of accentedness in their teachers' speech.

According to the results, high school students are well aware of the variety of native accents. However, the students from Prague seemed to have a greater knowledge and interest in accents in general. Concerning non-native accents, one third of the students had a favourite non-native accent. The most popular non-native accent turned out to be Russian English, which can be attributed to geographical proximity of Russia to the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the students' pronunciation goal is either achieving a near native-like accent (48%) or intelligible production (48%). However, the students agreed they would feel more confident if they had a more native-like accent. When dealing with the self-evaluation of their accents, most of the students viewed their accent as mildly accented or near native-like. Nevertheless, they are still not satisfied. In regard to their ideal pronunciation, the students mostly aspire to obtain the accent of their favourite actors, singers or YouTubers. Lastly, watching movies or TV series proved to be the most influential factor on their pronunciation.

Most of the students (84%) believe teachers ought to be equipped with a native-like pronunciation. However, when given a possibility to choose between a teacher with a near native-like accent and one with accented yet understandable speech, only 55% would be happy to have the teacher with a near native-like accent, while 35% would not focus on the individual's pronunciation, but would rather examine the other qualities a teacher should have.

Even though the practical part provides a description of high school students' accent attitudes, both personal and in connection with their teachers, I am well aware of the limitations

of the research. First of all, even though the number of participants was not extremely low (107), it did not provide the research with enough diversity. The Prague school focuses a lot on languages, which was reflected in the research: the students from Prague showed a greater interest in the completion of the survey and added interesting comments. Therefore, for further research, I would recommend choosing a more robust sample of respondents from different high schools across the Czech Republic. In addition, conducting interviews with the students after their completion of the questionnaire would be beneficial. The results of this research survey thus cannot be generalised, however they provide an idea of what high school students in the Czech Republic know about accents and what attitudes they hold.

Generally, it can be concluded that even though the students value the standard accents highly, the importance of intelligibility to them cannot be doubted. Thus, teachers ought to focus not only on the norm-setting accents, but should also dedicate time to non-native ones, in order to increase students' knowledge about the accent diversity of the English language. It could also be recommended to create a small survey in the classroom and discover what the students' goals in pronunciation are so that the results could be reflected in English lessons.

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## **APPENDIX**

Dear students, my name is Daniela Jandová and this is a questionnaire for my bachelor thesis. It focuses on high school students' attitudes and beliefs about native and non-native accents. The questionnaire consists of three parts and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. All the answers you provide in this survey will be kept confidential. Please, answer each question. There are no right or wrong answers. If you wish to add any comments, there is a space for you at the end of each part. I greatly appreciate your help! Thank You! :)

### **Introduction (personal information)**

Q1: What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other

Q2: Where do you study?

- Local school
- Prague school
- Local school

Q3: What year are you in?

- Kvinta (first year of grammar school)
- Oktáva (fourth year of grammar school)

Q4: What is your level in English?

- A1 (Beginner)
- A2 (Pre-intermediate)
- B1 (Intermediate)
- B2 (Upper-intermediate)
- C1 (Advanced)
- C2 (Proficient)

Q5: How often are you exposed to English outside school?

- Daily
- Once a week
- Two/three times a week
- Once a month
- Other

Q6: Where do you mostly communicate in English? (You can choose more than 1 answer.)

- At school
- Private language course
- At home
- Online (social media, computer games..)
- Other

Q7: Who do you mostly communicate with in English outside school?

- Native speakers
- Non-native speakers
- Both
- Nobody
- Other

Q8: Have you ever stayed in an English-speaking country for more than one month?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please specify where and for how long.

If you wish to add any comments to part 1, feel free to do so here.

### **Accent & me**

Q9: Do you enjoy learning foreign languages?

- Yes
- No

Q10: Please specify what other language/s you study.

Q11: What is your relationship towards English?

- I really like it.
- I like it.
- English is ok.
- I do NOT like it.
- I hate it.

Q12: Choose the sentence that best describes your goal in English pronunciation.

- I would like to sound like a native speaker.
- I want to be understood and I do not mind sounding a little bit foreign.
- I do not care about my pronunciation at all.
- Other

Q13: If I had a more native like accent in English, I would feel more confident while speaking.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q14: Is there a person you would like to sound like in English?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please specify who that person is. (e.g. my friend from London, Rachel from Friends, singer Rihanna, my favourite Youtuber, my English teacher..)

Q15: I think my English is

- strongly accented
- mildly accented
- near native-like
- native-like

Q16: I am satisfied with my accent in English.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q17: What or who do you think influenced your accent the most? (You can choose more than 1 answer.)

- My school English teacher
- My private English teacher
- Watching films/TV series in English (Netflix..)
- Listening to music
- Watching videos (Youtube..)
- Playing computer games
- Other

Q18: Which is your favourite native accent?

- British accent
- American accent
- Canadian accent
- Australian accent
- Scottish accent
- Irish accent
- Other

Q19: Do you have a favourite non-native accent in English (Spanish English, German English, Russian English, Italian English..)?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If yes, please specify what your favorite non-native accent is.

Q20: How would you react to this comment: I can hear an accent in your speech, where are you from?

- I would feel very disappointed.
- I would feel a little bit disappointed.
- This comment would make me work harder on my pronunciation.
- I would not mind, we all speak with an accent.
- I would not mind, being understood is more important.
- I would not care at all.

If you wish to add any comments to part 2, feel free to do so here.

### **Accent & teachers**

Q21: My English teacher at school has a native-like accent.

- Definitely yes
- Maybe yes
- Not sure
- No

Q22: My English teacher at school focuses on pronunciation.

- Yes, quite often.
- Sometimes
- Scarcely (not very often, hardly ever)
- Never

Q23: I think English teachers should have a native-like accent.

- Yes, definitely.
- Rather yes.
- I do not think it is important.
- Other

Q24: The way somebody sounds, in other words the degree of her or his accent in English, plays an important role in how we perceive that person. / To, jak zníme, jinými slovy míra akcentu v angličtině, hraje důležitou roli ve vnímání mluvčího.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- I'm not sure.
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q25: Imagine the following situation. You can choose a new teacher for your English lessons. The first one has an accented but understandable speech (you can tell he/she is Czech), the second one has near native-like pronunciation. Which one would you choose?

- I would choose the teacher with near native-like pronunciation.
- I would choose the teacher with accented yet understandable speech.
- I would not focus on the teacher's pronunciation, I would be interested in other qualities too (e.g. teaching skills, personality).
- Other

If you wish to add any comments to part 3, feel free to do so here.