Hungarian EFL Learners' Language Attitudes: The Influence of American English on Non-Native Speakers' Accent Preferences

Gyöngyi Püski

Abstract: This paper focuses on Hungarian EFL learners' attitudes toward Hungarian-accented and native varieties of English, with a special focus on the impact of American English on Hungarian EFL learners' accent preferences. The paper reports on the results of two pilot studies (prepared for the author's dissertation-in-progress): one carried out with the participation of 10 English major and 10 non-English major students, and a subsequent one based on the previous study, with 25 English majors, all from the University of Szeged. The results of the first study show that the majority describe their accent as being closer to American English than to British English, while the verbal guise experiment indicates that the British guise is preferred in all ratings (on both solidarity and status), with the exception of non-English majors' indicating that the American guise sounds 'warmer'. The majority of non-English majors believe that Hungarian EFL learners want to emulate American English, while most English majors think that it is British English or both British and American English that can be regarded as accent models for Hungarian learners of English. The results of the second study highlight that some of the participants consider their accents to be a mixture of British and American features, which they see as a flaw. Those respondents who wish to 'sound American' attach positive connotations to being able to speak English with an American accent, such as having a higher level of English knowledge and having an easily intelligible accent. The results suggest that American English seems to enjoy covert prestige even among those respondents who prefer British English in all respects, and positive values seem to be attached to Hungarian EFL speakers' having an American accent.
Keywords: language attitudes, EFL learners, non-native accent, American English, British English, verbal guise technique

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1. Introduction

Investigating EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' attitudes toward British vs. American English vs. their own non-native accent, and understanding what accent models of English they want to approximate can be important for understanding learners' linguistic choices and, potentially, the role of education in attitude formation.

The present study aims to uncover Hungarian university EFL students' attitudes toward British vs. American English, and their views about and expectations toward their own accents in English. The analysis focuses specifically on the influence of American English on Hungarian EFL learners' accent preferences, attitudes and self-evaluations. This paper reports on the results of two pilot studies (prepared for the author's dissertation-in-progress): one carried out with the participation of 10 English major and 10 non-English major students, and a subsequent one based on the previous study, with 25 English majors, all from the University of Szeged, Hungary.

By discovering the students' accent preferences and expectations toward themselves in terms of accent attainment, further investigations can be planned to help students evaluate their own Hungarian-accented English more positively.

2. Literature review

There seems to be an interesting distribution of attitudes among EFL learners toward British vs. American English, similar to what can be observed in the case of comparisons between native speakers' attitudes toward standard vs. non-standard varieties of the same language. Carrie (2017) discovered among (Castilian) Spanish EFL learners (with the help of the verbal guise technique) that, although they would like to approximate Received Pronunciation (RP), they consider General American (GenAm) to be more socially attractive. That is, RP seems to enjoy higher status, whereas participants feel greater solidarity toward GenAm. (The verbal guise technique is a variant of the matched guise technique, which has been used effectively in several studies since the 1960s to elicit personality evaluations of speakers solely based on their speech. One of the most well-known matched guise experiments is Lambert et al.'s 1966 French Canadian study.)

A similar pattern is observable when native speakers' attitudes toward Northern (closer to GenAm) and Southern (non-standard) accents of American English are compared. Kinzler and DeJesus (2013) explain that 9–10-year-old American children already show adult-like patterns in their attitudes toward Northern vs. Southern varieties of American English. While Northerners are perceived as 'smarter' and people who seem to be 'in charge', Southerners are evaluated as 'nicer', which is an illustrative example of the distribution of status vs. solidarity evaluations. Attitude studies in other languages also show similar patterns, such as in the case standard French and Belgian French, which Yzerbyt et al. (2005) refer to as *complementary stereotypes*.

Non-native speakers also tend to give higher ratings to standard speakers than to speakers of non-standard or non-dominant varieties of English in terms of status evaluations (Tévar 2014). Advanced Spanish students of English were asked to evaluate four varieties of British English: Received Pronunciation, Estuary, Cockney and Scottish English. RP received

the highest scores for e.g. being well-educated and working in a higher position, etc., while Scottish English received very low ratings. "The disdain Spanish EFL students felt toward Scottish English could be explained [… by] their ignorance about the variety, and their belief that it is out of the norm, and even non-native" (Tévar 2014, 71).

Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006) arrived at similar results to Carrie's above described 2017 findings, when they investigated the attitudes of Danish EFL learners. One of their male participants explained his opinions about American vs. British English as follows "I like the Americans and American history and culture seem more appealing and exciting but I certainly don't aim for an American accent" (Ladegaard and Sachdev 2006, 102). This finding might be explained in similar terms as Carrie's 2017 results, namely, that American English speakers are perceived as more likeable, but British English is considered more prestigious by EFL learners, and; therefore, the more prestigious accent is the one they would like to emulate. Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006, 106) interpret their findings in a way that adds further insight to the usual 'status vs. solidarity distinction'-based explanations. They point out the following:

> this study has provided evidence for what may be referred to as the *language–culture discrepancy hypothesis*. Underlying this hypothesis is the notion that it is perfectly feasible to have positive attitudes towards members of another ethnolinguistic group, and to state a preference for certain elements of that community, without wanting to adopt all the elements, including the language, of that culture. (Ladegaard and Sachdev 2006, 106)

What Trudgill (1972) terms *covert prestige* might also be useful to interpret the above results. While Trudgill mainly uses *covert prestige* to refer to male speakers' appreciation for working class speech as a signal of masculinity and toughness, which does not apply to the differences between participants' attitudes toward British vs. American English, there is a more general understanding that can be drawn from Trudgill's description of a type of prestige that is not in line with the mainstream views about the status of a variety. Based on Trudgill's assumptions, there seem to be cases when a variety is not considered highly prestigious but there is still some appeal to it on a more personal level. In view of this approach, Received Pronunciation might enjoy overt prestige among EFL learners, while American English can be considered to have covert prestige.

When it comes to vocabulary preference only, Koceva and Kostadinova (2023) found that EFL learners at a Macedonian and a Bulgarian university show no clear preference for either British or American vocabulary items when tested on a translation exercise from their mother tongue into English, with a special focus on words that are used differently in the two varieties, i.e. the words are not the same (e.g. *garden* vs. *yard*) or at least the spelling is different (e.g. *favourite* vs. *favorite*). The results show that there is a constant mixing of British and American vocabulary items in the participants' (written) English.

Lei (2016) defines three sub-processes of internalization that are important for language learners when improving their L2 English writing skills: noticing, imitating and goal setting. Lei argues that those participants who were skilled L2 writers were considerably better at noticing proficient language use in literary works, for instance. Coming across interesting and highly expressive language use was a source of joy and fascination for them, unlike for unskilled L2 writers. Skilled L2 writers were able to go further than simply noticing exemplary language use: they were also more likely to imitate the language use of proficient native writers. One of the participants noted: "If I borrow them from those exemplary works, my essays will look like professional native writers', which is exactly what I am pursuing" (Lei 2016, 110). Goal setting for the skilled participants included practicing and reviewing the writing strategies that they had seen proficient L1 writers use.

Kung and Wang (2019) suggest that Lei's 2016 notions of *noticing*, *imitating* and *goal setting* can be used for the context of L2 accent preferences and accent learning, as well. Participants in their study seemed to notice different accents from the media or during their

language learning at school, or through communication with other native or non-native speakers, and they imitated the ones they liked the most (typically British and American English) through repetition. American English is typically encountered in the media, and 'Cambridge English' is preferred by Chinese EFL course books. However, when participants needed to communicate with international students after high school, their goals changed, as effective communication came to the fore. The authors note that their findings support the idea that "teaching materials and learning access play a significant role in learners' accent preferences" (Kung and Wang 2019, 403). A similar idea was formulated by Liao and Hu (2016), as well, who investigated Taiwanese EFL learners' attitudes toward British vs. American English. As American English is preferred in Taiwanese EFL education, students rarely encounter other varieties of English, including British English, in the classroom. Interestingly, this does not seem to cause comprehension difficulties when listening to British English, but participants have more favorable attitudes toward American English.

In addition to status and solidarity, dynamism (e.g. confidence and talkativeness) was used as a category of traits in Mısır and Gürbüz's 2022 investigation, and the seven accents included in the study were British, American, Australian, Hong Kong, Indian, Jamaican and Turkish English. The participants (Turkish in-service teachers of English) were able to correctly identify American and Turkish English the most frequently, and Hong Kong and Australian English were the varieties that were the least known to them. American English received the highest ratings for all the three categories of traits (with the ratings for status being equal with Australian English). The qualitative analysis echoed the results of the quantitative part of the study, as "I definitely have the Turkish accent, but if I have to choose one native accent that my accent is closer, it would be American accent" and "I like my accent but I would prefer to speak American English" were among the responses to the open-ended questions of the study (Mısır and Gürbüz 2022, 462–463).

Nguyen (2022) categorized their Vietnamese ESL/EFL learner participants' attitudes toward British vs. American English as cognitive, affective and conative responses. In terms of cognitive evaluations, which comprised items related to perceived personality and socio-economic traits, such as 'trustworthy' and 'wealthy', British English received higher status ratings, while American English received higher solidarity ratings. Regarding the affective (e.g. liking, preferring, being irritated by the accent) and conative (e.g. target accent) dimensions, American English was preferred.

Carrie (2015) arrived at similar results. Her Spanish university student respondents expressed more favorable ratings for RP overall, but particularly in terms of status (i.e. prestige, competence), while GenAm was evaluated positively in terms of solidarity (i.e. social attractiveness). Social attractiveness, Carrie notes, seems to be an affective measure, and the conative component of the participants' attitudes showed that they believed to have an accent similar to the one they considered to be more socially attractive (which was often GenAm). Even so, they expressed their wish to have an accent similar to RP. Carrie (2015, poster) concludes that "RP speech has formal and functional associations and GenAm has informal and interpersonal associations." The results reveal that the students' attitudes influenced their accent production in English. The production of four target variables was investigated, revealing that the majority of the respondents preferred to use the RP variant of the intervocalic /t/, i.e. [t] (71.5%), the post-consonantal /u/, i.e. [juː] (83.5%) and the low back vowel, i.e. [ɒ] (91.5%). The only preference for GenAm in the participants' accent production was in the case of the post-vocalic /r/, which might be caused by the fact that it is easier for Spanish EFL learners to produce rhotic speech, and the spelling also influences their pronunciation. Most of the participants were observed to produce a "hybrid 'learner' accent" (Carrie, 2015, poster), in which a mixture of RP and GenAm features was present. In a 2013 conference paper reporting on the same investigation, Carrie argues that the participants' attitudes proved to be a good indicator of their realization of the intervocalic /t/ as [t] or [ɾ], as it was found that "[w]here respondents viewed a speech variety as being useful to them or

expressed a specific preference for that variety, they inevitably imitated the phonological variant associated with that variety" (Carrie 2013, 4). Spanish participants seemed to identify RP correctly more often than GenAm, and when they misidentified GenAm as RP, they assigned high status to it (Carrie and McKenzie 2018).

Similarly, British English seems to be associated with prestige and American English with informality, according to Norwegian learners of English, as Rindal (2010) reports. They mix British and American features in their own speech (which might be occasioned by the formality or informality of the context), and their linguistic choices contribute to their (L2) identity construction. Rindal suggests that the participants are able to strategically select and use features from different varieties of English, with the help of which they construct local meanings. These findings underline the dynamic nature of linguistic choices and identity construction, and suggest that the negotiation of identity extends to L2 use (Rindal 2010).

The formal connotations of sounding native-like (in general) were highlighted in Özçelik's 2022 study. The Turkish university students participating in the investigation showed a preference for British English as an 'ideal' accent for daily and professional communication, and American English was their second most preferred accent. "They believed that if they had a British or American English accent, they would sound better to the other speakers" (Özçelik 2022, 430). Specifically, the respondents accentuated the importance of sounding native-like in professional contexts, as it makes them sound more 'sophisticated' and gives them more 'prestige', while daily language use can be more casual and relaxed. However, another large group of respondents prioritized intelligibility over approximating a particular native accent.

Sung (2016, 59) suggests that "[w]hat seems to motivate the participant to sound native-like is the symbolic value of native-speaker pronunciation, particularly the prestige associated with it and the recognition that one may gain from other interlocutors in ELF [English as a lingua franca] communication." This argument is based on participants' considering native accents as 'superior', 'ideal', 'highly proficient' and 'the best', while expressing their concerns that sounding 'non-native' can evoke negative evaluations. For the respondents, native-like accent attainment was linked to a positive self-image.

As Jenkins (2007) explains, sounding native-like is really important for her non-native participants, as well. That is what they consider the 'real thing', the 'perfect' way of speaking English, while non-native accents are considered less valuable, and even 'horrible or 'deficient' varieties. The respondents seem to construe the native–non-native dichotomy as an 'accent hierarchy', where non-native accents are down at the bottom, while Received Pronunciation and General American are high up. (It is notable that other native varieties, such as New Zealand English, Scottish English, or the Texan accent, were not highly valued by the respondents.)

When comparing the attitudes of Korean English major and non-English major students toward English as an international language (EIL) with the help of rating scales, Lee and Lee (2019) found that English majors had more positive attitudes toward different Outer and Expanding Circle varieties of English (in general and also when specifically used as in-class listening materials), and toward using strategies for multilingual/multicultural communication than non-English majors, although both groups expressed quite positive attitudes. The difference between the two groups of respondents was more pronounced in the case of two rating scales, namely, being able to explain Korean culture to people from different backgrounds and accepting various Outer Circle Englishes as legitimate varieties. In another study, Lee and Chen Hsieh (2018) concluded that Korean and Taiwanese non-English major university students reacted positively to the idea of EIL (English as an international language), but using non-native speech samples in English classes was less accepted by Korean students than by their Taiwanese counterparts. The participants also showed a strong sense of ownership toward their own varieties of English, with Korean students scoring even higher than Taiwanese students. Both respondent groups showed agreement with the statements

"English teachers should not push me to speak like a 'native' English speaker" and "It is unnecessary to speak like American or British English speakers as long as my English is intelligible (or understandable) to others" (Lee and Chen Hsieh 2018, 796); however, it was more difficult for them to agree with a hypothetical situation in which people laugh at their accent but it does not matter to them because it is their 'own' English (which they cherish).

These findings are in considerable contrast with Liou's 2010 findings, which show that Taiwanese EFL teachers and learners are not in favor of the idea that varieties of EIL could become accent models for learners. While teachers are willing to accept different varieties of English outside school, in class they require students to use 'Standard English' grammar and pronunciation, and they also expect the same from a 'good' English teacher. ELF learners in the study had similar attitudes toward EIL, namely, they wished to sound native-like rather than accept an EIL accent showing their non-native origins. As Liou (2010, 154) points out, "[i]n their view, English still belongs to its native speakers". The title of the study itself ("Who wants EIL?") can be seen as a warning to English language educators, drawing attention to a rather negative view of non-native Englishes among L2 users. Llurda (2009) suggests that non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) can feel 'downgraded' as they teach a language of which they are not considered 'owners', which is a paradoxical situation that can be resolved if the teachers themselves experience multiple varieties of English and start focusing more on multilingualism and international communication.

Labov (1966) calls instances when non-standard native speakers of English from New York City have negative attitudes toward their own variety (which they use on a daily basis) and idealize 'correct' speech as cases of *linguistic insecurity*, which is detrimental to one's self-perception and confidence, and which seems similar to what non-native speakers experience, as I argued in a previous paper (Püski 2021). Labov (1966) even argues that *linguistic self-hatred* might be a fitting term to describe these speakers' attitudes toward their own speech. However, Macaulay (1975) is critical of the Labovian view that linguistic insecurity and linguistic self-hatred are strongly present in the New York City speech community. He argues that it was a result of the research design that participants were highly aware of the differences between their own speech and the 'standard', and, in fact, it "show[s] remarkable linguistic confidence on the part of two thirds of the informants" (Macaulay 1975, 149) that they claimed to speak either 'correctly' or with minimal differences from what is considered 'correct'.

These two strikingly different interpretations of the same results might shed light on the above described differences between the findings of seemingly similar studies (e.g. Lee and Chen Hsieh 2018 and Liou 2010). The questions asked can influence the participants' responses and the interpretations made might focus on different aspects of the answers, thus arriving at greatly different conclusions. Therefore, more studies are necessary to understand non-native learners' accent preferences, opinions about non-native English language use, and whether their seeming acceptance or rejection of EIL varieties can accurately describe their linguistic insecurity or confidence.

3. Methodology

3.1. First pilot

3.1.1. Participants

Twenty Hungarian female students from the University of Szeged, Hungary, participated in the investigation: 10 English majors and 10 non-English majors, in order for the researcher to be able to compare the responses of those students who encounter and use English in their daily lives vs. those who use English less frequently or stopped learning it after high school. At the time of the investigation, participants were between 19 and 25 years of age (first- to fifth-year students), and had been learning/had learnt English for 4–17 years. The term *English majors* is

used for students whose fields of studies are related to the study of the English language and/or whose majors are taught in English (six English teacher trainees, an English Studies BA student, an American Studies MA student, an English–Spanish-Hungarian translator student, and a student enrolled in the International Studies MA program in English). *Non-English majors* were students whose majors are not taught in English and are unrelated to the English language. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used to reach the respondents.

All the students in the *English majors*' group have an English language certificate: six students have a C1 and four students a B2 level certificate. All the English majors were actively learning English at the time of the investigation. Among the non-English majors, three people did not have a language certificate, two had a C1 and five a B2 level certificate. Only one of the ten non-English majors was actively learning English at the time when the data was collected (the fall semester of the 2019/2020 school year).

3.1.2. Method of data collection

The investigation carried out for the author's MA thesis was technically the first pilot for her dissertation, as participants' attitudes toward Hungarian-accented English, their own accent, and various native varieties of English were approached by the author for the first time in this investigation, with the intention to build a foundation and discover trajectories for future studies. In this paper, participants' attitudes toward American English are in the focus, therefore only the relevant parts of the data collection are described here. The data that exceeds the scope of this paper was analyzed and published separately (Püski 2021).
The answers to three specific questions/tasks are analyzed in this paper, the first of which is a question inquiring about the respondents' opinions about the target accent(s) that L2 speakers of English wish to approximate. *Ha egy nyelvtanuló úgy akar hangozni, mintha az angol lenne az anyanyelve, melyik ország beszélőire akar hasonlítani?* "If a language learner wants to sound like a native speaker of English, which country's speakers do they want to resemble?"

In the second task reported on in this paper, the verbal guise technique was used to test the participants' attitudes toward the two most well-known varieties of English for EFL learners: 'standard' British and 'standard' American English (accent). While it might be problematic to point out objectively one standard accent in both contexts, in this paper, accents close to Received Pronunciation and General American, respectively, will be referred to as the 'standard'. The recordings of the two speakers for the investigation were selected from two audio book versions of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, published in 2000 (British version) and 2013 (American version). The narrators are two male actors: Kenneth Branagh (British guise) and Viggo Mortensen (American guise), who were both middle-aged when the recordings were made, they have the same profession, and a similar level of education, and are used to reciting texts.

It was important for the purpose of this investigation that the two speakers read a text (and do not produce speech spontaneously), as, this way, vocabulary and grammar differences were avoided and respondents focused on accent only. The audio recordings were edited to include only the relevant section from Chapter 24 of *The Little Prince*, and the same music was inserted in the American recording that was part of the British one in order to avoid the influence of only one of the recordings having background music. (The reverse, i.e. removing the background music from the British recording was not feasible). A longer pause was edited out from the British version to prevent its becoming an influencing factor in the participants' ratings. The edited British and the American speech samples were 37 and 35 seconds long, respectively, and were extracted from the full British audio book and the promotional video of the American audio book available on YouTube here:

British guise (from 1:24:4 to 1:24:43):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APG1upS8LDw

American guise (from 0:08 to 0:43)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkYxRUHcJxA .

As an illustration, the passage is provided below in Richard Howard's translation from the French original, with my emphasis on the phonemes that are pronounced with salient differences in the two recordings. The highlighted differences are related to rhoticity, the pronunciation of the GOAT vowel, the TRAP–BATH split, the pronunciation of the intervocalic /t/ as a flap or aspirated [t], the vowel in e.g. the first syllable of *walked* being pronounced as [ɔː] or [ɑː], the vowel in e.g. *what* being realized as [ɒ] or [ɑː], and the presence or absence of a linking /r/.

> I made an exasperated gesture. It is absurd looking for a well, at random, in the vastness of the desert. But even so, we started walking.
> When we had walked for several hours in silence, night fell and stars began to appear. I noticed them as in a dream, being somewhat feverish on account of my thirst. The little price's words danced in my memory.
> "So you're thirsty too?" I asked.
> But he didn't answer my question.

Respondents indicated their answers on 5-point semantic differential (Likert-type) rating scales, which are characterized by having adjective pairs with opposite meanings at the two ends of the scales. The rationale behind choosing 5-point scales was that this rating method resembles the Hungarian grading system, where 1 signifies the worst achievement and 5 the best. In order to avoid responses to misidentified accents (e.g. identifying American English as Canadian, British English as Australian, etc.), the participants were told which accent they were listening to (see Carrie and McKenzie's 2018 results in the Literature review on the influence of accent misidentification on participants' ratings). The first guise they listened to was the British guise, followed by the American in the case of every respondent. The rating scales contained adjective pairs for four status and four solidarity traits in a mixed order. The status traits were the following: *unintelligens/intelligens* "unintelligent/intelligent", *tanulatlan/tanult* "uneducated/educated", *szegény/gazdag* "poor/rich", *buta/okos* "stupid/clever", and the solidarity traits were *távolságtartó/közvetlen* "distant/warm", *barátságtalan/barátságos* "unfriendly/friendly", *mogorva/kedves* "sullen/kind", *unszimpatikus/szimpatikus* "unlikeable/likeable".

Third, after filling out the rating scales part of the questionnaire, participants were also asked to indicate whether they considered their own accent to be more similar to American English, British English, or neither.

3.1.3. Data analysis

In the case of the first, open-ended question analyzed in this paper, the instances of each mention were counted and compared across the two respondent groups. In the case of the verbal guise exercises, trait-by-trait mean scores, mean scores grouped into status and solidarity categories, and the total of all the mean scores were calculated in both groups, and, beyond group tendencies, more individualized calculations were also made. For the third, multiple choice question, the instances of each response were counted and compared across the two groups.

3.2. Second pilot

3.2.1. Participants

The participants of the second pilot were 25 English majors (English Studies students and English teacher trainees) at the University of Szeged. Among the respondents there were 22 female and 3 male students between the ages of 18 and 24, and they had been learning English for 5–15 years at the time of the investigation, which was carried out in the spring semester of the 2020/2021 school year, during the period of online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2.2. Data collection

Due to the circumstances, the data collection took place online, with the help of Jamboard, which allows people to write their answers anonymously on a virtual notice board, using "sticky notes". In order to ensure that the same students' answers to different questions can be compared, a number was written on each "sticky note" by the researcher in advance, and students were asked to choose a number and keep using the notes with the same number throughout the whole online questionnaire. The students filled out the questionnaire in two groups, and the researcher was available constantly via Zoom while the students were writing their answers, in order to be able to provide assistance if technical difficulties arose. All the 25 students answered every question, and it took approximately 25 minutes to fill out the questionnaire for both groups. Participation was voluntary, and the only requirement for participation was having learnt English in a Hungarian high school. The participants were in a student-teacher relationship with the researcher, as they attended one of the researcher's courses.

The Jamboard questionnaire contained nine open-ended questions, out of which five are relevant for the purposes of this paper. The experimental statistical analysis of all the nine questions from the perspective of the changeability of EFL learners' attitudes through teaching was published separately (Püski 2023). The questions relevant for this investigation are the following:

1. *Mennyire elégedett a jelenlegi angol kiejtésével? Miért?* "To what extent are you satisfied with your current accent in English? Why?"
2. *Ha még nem elégedett a jelenlegi angol kiejtésével, milyen kiejtésre vágyik?* "If you are not yet satisfied with your current accent in English, what kind of accent would you like to have?"
3. *Ha magyar akcentussal beszélt angolt hall, mi a véleménye róla?* "When you hear Hungarian-accented English, what is your opinion about it?"
4. *A saját kiejtését "magyar akcentusosnak" tekinti?* "Do you consider your own accent in English 'Hungarian-accented'?"
5. *Középiskolában hallott-e az előbb olvasott szövegben leírtakról?* "Did you hear about the content of the above text in high school?" [A text describing the immense variety of native and non-native Englishes was provided for the students, which is the text this question references. See the text in the Appendix.]

3.2.3. Data analysis

Those answers to the open-ended questions were selected and analyzed in this paper which are related to American English, that is, from which the influence of American English on the respondents' accent preferences can be inferred. This part of the analysis is entirely qualitative.

4. Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Results: First pilot

The question inquiring about the perceived accent models for L2 learners shows that the respondents have a strong bias for the two most well-known native varieties of English. There were four respondents in the English majors' group who considered British English as the most important accent model for language learners, three students indicated that it was American English that L2 speakers typically wanted to emulate, and three students wrote both British and American English. One of the students who chose both British and American English as popular accent models for language learners also gave a detailed explanation for her response, which was as follows: *Szerintem, ha "különlegesebb" szeretne [lenni], akkor a brit akcentusra fog hajtani, hisz azt autentikusnak és kifinomultnak tartják. Ha érthetőbb akar lenni, akkor az amerikai akcentusra akar hasonlítani.* "If one wants to be more 'unique', they will strive for learning a British accent, as it is considered to be authentic and sophisticated. If one wants to be more intelligible, they will want to emulate an American accent." This remark highlights that there might be differences between the perceived benefits to sounding British vs. American.

In contrast with the English majors' responses, the majority of non-English majors (seven out of ten) indicated that it was American English that language learners wished to approximate. Two students chose British English, and one student vaguely indicated a non-specified native accent. The idea that L2 learners of English might not want to sound native-like, or that native-like accent attainment might not be possible or necessary for non-native speakers did not appear in the responses of either participant group.

In the verbal guise experiment, as Table 1 below shows, the English majors preferred the British guise on all the status and solidarity scales (although the difference is not always very salient), and they gave the highest ratings to the British speaker for three status traits, i.e. 'being educated', 'intelligent' and 'clever'. Non-English majors' ratings show a similar tendency with slight differences: they preferred the British guise on six scales, gave equal ratings to the two speakers for 'being rich', and preferred the American guise in terms of 'being warm'. Non-English majors also gave the highest ratings to the British speaker for the same three status traits: 'being educated', 'intelligent' and 'clever'.

Trait	Respondent group	British guise	American guise
Unintelligent/ intelligent	E	4.5	4.1
	NE	4.8	4.2
Distant/ warm	E	3.9	3.4
	NE	3.8	3.2
Unfriendly/ friendly	E	4.0	3.6
	NE	3.9	3.7
Uneducated/ educated	E	4.6	4.2
	NE	4.8	4.0
Sullen/ kind	E	3.8	3.7
	NE	4.0	3.8
Unlikeable/ likeable	E	3.9	3.8
	NE	4.4	4.2
Rich/ poor	E	3.8	3.5
	NE	3.6	3.6
Stupid/ clever	E	4.4	4.2
	NE	4.5	4.3

Total status	E	4.33	4.0
	NE	4.43	4.0
Total solidarity	E	3.90	3.63
	NE	4.0	3.73
Total	E	4.11	3.81
	NE	4.15	3.95

Table 1. Trait-by-trait mean scores, mean scores grouped into status and solidarity categories, and total of mean scores for the two guises in the two respondent groups. (E=English majors, NE=non-English majors)

If the individual raters are taken into consideration, the results show that six of the ten English majors gave a higher total rating (i.e. the sum of all the points) to the British guise than to the American one, in the case of two students the total scores were the same for the two speakers, and two students gave a higher total score to the American guise. In the non-English majors' group, six of the ten students gave a higher total rating to the British speaker, the total scores were higher for the American guise in the case of three students, and one student gave equal total scores to both speakers.

The question asking the respondents to indicate whether their own accent resembles British or American English more, or neither of these varieties, yielded unexpected results considering the above described ratings. Six of the ten English majors considered their accents to resemble American English more, two marked British English, and two students indicated that their accents resembled neither one. It is important to note that if one marks "neither", it does not necessarily mean that they do not consider their accent to resemble any native variety of English. However, as the students indicated only British and American English as the accent models L2 speakers want to emulate (as it was described previously in this paper), it is not likely that they consider their accent to be similar to another native variety. Non-English majors' answers show a similar pattern: six of them marked "American English" as the variety their accents resemble, one person marked "British English" and three respondents chose "neither".

4.1.2. Results: Second pilot

To the question about the extent to which they are satisfied with their current accent in English, two students (n=25) gave responses which reference the influence of American English on their speech. One participants responded *Közepesen, sokszor váltakozok a brit és az amerikai kiejtések között.* "[I am] moderately [satisfied with my accent]. It often alternates between a British and an American accent." The other student's answer was similar: *Közepesen elégedett, lehetne jobb is. Néha keverem a brit és amerikai kiejtéseket. Van még hova fejlődnöm, de nem rossz.* "[I am] moderately satisfied, but it could be better. Sometimes I mix British and American pronunciation. There is still room for improvement, but it is not bad." What both of these statements have in common is that these participants seem to view the mixed use of British and American features in their pronunciation as a flaw, something that they refer to in their answer as a part of the explanation as to why they are only moderately satisfied with their accent.

Four students (n=25) answered the question about their desired accent in a way that included a reference to American English. One of the respondents gave a very clear answer: *Olyan kiejtésre vágyom, ami inkább hasonlít egy amerikai anyanyelvi ember beszédéhez.* "I would like to have an accent that resembles the speech of a native speaker of American English." The second respondent's preference for having an American accent is only indicated in brackets, but their desire to sound native-like, preferably American, is clearly stated. *Szeretnék eljutni arra a szintre, hogy olyan kiejtéssel rendelkezzek, mint egy (inkább amerikai) angol anyanyelvű ember.* "I would like to reach a level where I have an accent similar to a (preferably American) native speaker of English." For the third student, confident delivery and fluency are important,

and, while they consider learning different accents as a 'good thing', first and foremost they would prefer learning to speak English with an American accent. *Magabiztosabb és folyékonyabb kiejtést. Jó lenne különböző akcentusokat is megtanulni. Főleg ami hasonlít az amerikai anyanyelvi kiejtéshez.* "[I would like to have] a more confident and fluent accent. It would be good to learn different accents. Especially one resembling the accent of a native speaker of American English." The fourth respondent making a reference to American English in their answer did not express an exclusive preference for American English; both British and American English seem to be important accent models for them due to intelligibility concerns. *Sokszor hallgatok brit és amerikai akcentusú előadókat vagy színészeket. Célom, hogy a kiejtésem hasonlóan tiszta és érthető legyen.* "I often listen to speakers or actors with a British or American accent. My goal is to have a similarly clear and intelligible accent."

There were seven respondents who indicated that they would like to approximate a British accent (not including the above mentioned student who considers both British and American English as accent models to follow).

There was one student who alluded to American English in their response to the question asking the participants' opinion about Hungarian-accented English. This participant indicated that hearing Hungarian-accented English is weird, as it is not something they commonly listen to. *Furcsa, mert legtöbbször amerikai és a brit angolt hallok, de nem ítélkezem.* "[It is] weird, as I listen to/hear American and British English most of the time, but I do not judge [Hungarian-accented English].

Regarding the question whether they consider their own accent to be Hungarian-accented, one participant, who answered 'no', indicated an idea similar to what already emerged in the responses to the first question, namely, that they tend to mix British and American pronunciation features in their speech. *Nem mondanám, inkább brit standard–amerikai keverék.* "I would not call it [Hungarian-accented]; it is rather a mixture of standard British and American [accents].

The question inquiring about participants' experiences in high school related to learning about the multiplicity of native and non-native varieties of English, in relation to a text (see the Appendix) about this topic, which the participants read before answering this question, yielded one answer that is specifically related to American English: *Leginkább csak egy-egy szónál merült fel az amerikai/brit akcentusbeli különbség, pl. az* either *szónál.* "The difference between British and American accent was alluded to only in the case of differences between the pronunciation of certain words, such as *either*." This response indicates that, according to the participant, it was not common in their own high school English classes to get a glimpse at the differences between other varieties of English, or the differences between various American or various British accents. The other students' responses support this assumption, as 19 other students indicated that they did not hear (or did not 'really' hear) about the vast diversity of native and non-native accents of English in high school. Out of the remaining five students who gave a positive answer, one person indicated that the variety of accents they encountered were typically accents of British English, another student mentioned that they discussed Cockney with their high school teacher, one person explained that the topic was rarely brought up, and only two respondents indicated confidently, without mitigation, that they heard about the diversity of English in high school.

4.2. Findings

As the results indicate, there seems to be a preference among the respondents of the first pilot for British English, both in terms of status and solidarity, with status traits receiving the highest ratings. Even so, six English majors and six non-English majors consider their accent to be more similar to American English. This might be explained by Ladegaard and Sachdev's 2006 *language–culture discrepancy hypothesis*, or Trudgill's 1972 notion of *covert prestige*, and is in line with Carrie's 2015 findings. The stereotypical distribution of status (British English) and

solidarity (American English), which was observed in previous studies (e.g. Ladegaard and Sachdev 2006, Carrie 2017, Nguyen 2022) was not apparent from the participants' answers.
As previous studies have also indicated, British and American English were chosen as the most popular accent models for language learners in the first pilot (c.f. Jenkins 2007, Mısır and Gürbüz 2022, Özçelik 2022). The responses also showed that there might be differences between the perceived benefits to sounding British vs. American. British English is seen as 'sophisticated', while American English is considered more 'intelligible', as one of the participants explained. This is in line with previous studies indicating that British English is better suited to professional contexts, while American English is more informal and better used in one's daily life (e.g. Rindal 2010 and Carrie 2015).

The results of the second pilot highlight that some of the participants consider their accents to be a mixture of British and American features, which they see as a flaw. Other researchers have also remarked that using a mixture of British and American features is often characteristic of language learner's speech (Rindal 2010, Carrie 2015) and writing (Koceva and Kostadinova 2023). However, it would be important to explain to EFL learners that having a "hybrid 'learner' accent" (Carrie 2015, poster) is a natural feature of L2 users' speech and not a flaw or mistake that makes their language use less valuable. In fact, Jenkins (2002) suggests that a mixture of British and American characteristics is desirable in language learners' speech (e.g. British intervocalic [t] and American rhoticity), and argues that intelligibility for other L2 speakers should be prioritized over intelligibility for native speakers, as it is more likely for L2 speakers to use English for international communication among themselves.

While British English seems to enjoy more prestige among the respondents of both studies, those respondents in the second study who wish to 'sound American' attach positive connotations to being able to speak English with an American accent, such as having a more confident command of English or having an easily intelligible accent.

The fact that the majority of the respondents in the second study reported virtually no mention of the vast multiplicity of English accents during their high school studies suggests that this circumstance might contribute to the participants' desire to sound native-like and emulate one of the two most well-known native varieties, as "teaching materials and learning access play a significant role in learners' accent preferences" (Kung and Wang 2019, 403). Furthermore, Sung (2016) pointed out the possible links between a positive self-image and native-like accent attainment. However, the author of this paper believes that, as native-like attainment is often not a feasible goal, it would be important to familiarize learners with multiple varieties of English in order to help them understand that their own accent is just one of the many possible accents that users of English have around the world, which is also in line with Llurda's 2009 suggestions.

5. Conclusion

As it has been pointed out in this paper, sounding native-like seems to be important to the respondents of both studies. While British English tends to be evaluated higher in all respects, American English seems to have a different kind of attractiveness for the students (e.g. intelligibility) and is considered to be more similar to the majority's accent. The mixing of British and American features is frowned upon by the students who pointed out that it was characteristic of their speech. As encountering a great variety of English accents does not seem to be characteristic of the respondents' high school experiences, this suggests that their strong reliance on standard British and American English as accent models might stem from a lack of familiarity with other accents. In order to show Hungarian EFL learners that their English is valuable even if it is not native-like, and intelligibility can be preserved despite having a non-native accent, it would be important to familiarize students with a greater number of English accents in high school.

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Appendix

The text participants read as a part of the second pilot study before answering the question *Középiskolában hallott-e az előbb olvasott szövegben leírtakról?* "Did you hear about the content of the above text in high school?" is included in the Appendix.

Hungarian (original) version:

Az angol nyelvnek számtalan anyanyelvi nyelvváltozata létezik (pl. brit, amerikai, ausztrál, újzélandi, kanadai, ír, skót, stb.), és az anyanyelvi nyelvváltozatokon belül is számtalan nemstandard változatot találunk (pl. Cockney, African American Vernacular English). A világon pedig szinte minden országban (kisebb vagy nagyobb mértékben) sokaknak a mindennapi élet része az angol nyelv használata. Természetesen a nem anyanyelvi változatok is sokfélék, nem egyetlen standard formát követnek. De minden nyelvváltozat alkalmas lehet a hatékony kommunikációra, és a beszélő szükségleteinek megfelelő használatra. Tehát attól, hogy valaki nem úgy beszél, mint egy anyanyelvi beszélő, a nyelvhasználata, kiejtése nem értéktelenebb, mint az anyanyelvi beszélőké. Az anyanyelvi beszélők sem egyformán beszélnek, így az "anyanyelvi kiejtés" fogalma is problémás. Melyik kiejtésre is gondolunk? Ha nem létezik egyetlen "anyanyelvi kiejtés", akkor miért kellene a nyelvtanulóknak azon aggódniuk, hogy nem "anyanyelvi" a kiejtésük?

English translation:

The English language has several native varieties (e.g. British, American, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, Irish, Scottish, etc.) and within these native varieties we can find lots of non-standard dialects (e.g. Cockney, African American Vernacular English, etc.). In the world, in virtually every country, to differing extents, English is a part of everyday life for lots of people. Naturally, non-native varieties are also various and do not follow one standard form. However, every variety can be used effectively for communication and to fulfill the needs of the speakers. Therefore, just because one does not have a native accent, their language use and pronunciation are not less valuable than those of native speakers. Even native speakers don't speak alike, which makes the unified notion of "native pronunciation" problematic. Which accent do we mean? If there is no unified "native accent", then why should language learners worry about not having a "native accent"?