

# MASTERING EFL PRONUNCIATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND POLAND: A QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE APPROACH

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This paper examines the issue of the mastering of EFL pronunciation among 144 students of English studies in North Macedonia (n=34) and Poland (n=110) by means of a questionnaire consisting of: 23 scalar judgments and 4 closed questions. The responses to the questions provide information on: the best place to study pronunciation, the preferred English accent, the types of communication problems and the general awareness of the informants' own pronunciation problems. The results of the judgments confirm a very traditional approach to the notion of accent in a FL in which close proximity to a native speaker norm is regarded as an ideal and passing for a native-speaker is aspired to. These findings shed some light on university students' phonetic priorities and might be significant for teachers of phonetics in these two European countries and beyond them.

**Cite as:** Nowacka, M. (2022). Mastering EFL pronunciation in North Macedonia and Poland: a quantitative questionnaire approach. In J. Levis & A. Guskaroska (eds.), *Proceedings of the 12th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, held June 2021 virtually at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON. <https://doi.org/10.31274/psllt.13351>

## INTRODUCTION

Since this paper concerns Macedonian and Polish EFL learners, a brief outline of the latest comparative findings relating to these two nationalities is offered. Henderson et al. (2012) and Kirkova-Naskova et al. (2013) report on a large-scale European survey including 36 Macedonian (henceforth MK) and 20 Polish (henceforth PL) teachers. They showed that the teachers in the two cohorts found pronunciation important in relation to other skills (MK: 3.14 vs. PL: 3.92 in a 5-point scale). They self-evaluate their level of pronunciation as good (MK: 4.43 vs. PL: 3.92). The Macedonians gave low ratings for their training to teach pronunciation. Only 19% of Poles report having received formal training of that kind. The teachers evaluate students' aspiration to achieve a native-like level in pronunciation with 3.43 (MK) and 2.71 (PL). This low rating for aspiration to sound native-like in Poland was attributed to the fact that the respondents had taught children. In Macedonia, teachers favour the use of RP over GA in receptive (henceforth R) (92% vs. 46%) and, to a lesser degree, productive (henceforth P) work (77% vs. 69%). Some report that they attempt to implement International English (IE) (R: 23%, P: 46%). They, however, believe that their students prefer General American (GA) (R: 77%, P: 100%) to other varieties: IE (R: 38%, P: 31%) and Received Pronunciation (RP) (R: 31%, P: 15%). In Poland in both types of tasks RP is predominantly applied by teachers (R: 100%, P: 100%) rather than GA (R: 75%, P: 42%) or IE (R: 17%, P: 8%). There is also a slight preference for RP (R & P: 67%) over GA (R: 67%, P: 50%) in the teacher's ratings of students' preference for a variety. Kirkova-Naskova et al. (2013) provide further details concerning training on teaching pronunciation. Both groups indicate three types of qualitative responses: 1) phonetic course as a part of their undergraduate studies, 2) intertwined with other topics, as part of a general TEFL course, 3) hardly any or very little native speaker contact or a stay

in an English-speaking country. To this list the Polish teachers add another category of ‘several courses not specific to pronunciation or phonetics’. This study aims to uncover some more similarities and differences with regard to pronunciation instruction between these two groups of respondents.

## **Research Aims**

This paper presents the result of a questionnaire on mastering EFL pronunciation by university students of English in North Macedonia and Poland.

The main aims of this study are:

- firstly, to compare the goals of pronunciation instruction in these two countries in order to find out if the respondents opt for the Nativeness principle or the Intelligibility principle,
- and secondly, to examine the students’ reasons for speaking with good pronunciation and their opinion on other pronunciation-related matters.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

As regards the method, the study includes 144 participants, i.e. 34 Macedonians enrolled at university level in North Macedonia and 110 Polish university students of English studies at university in Poland. The Macedonians were first (74%) and third (26%) year students of the English language and literature aged between 18 and 22, mostly female (80%). They had been learning English between 7 and 15 years - 33% indicating 10 years.

The Polish subjects were 110 first-year students of the English language at the University of Rzeszow, 68% females and 32% males, 66% on a full-time and 34% on a part-time BA course in the English language, at the end of a two-semester phonetic course. Their age ranged from 18 to 34 years - majority of the students (82%) were 20 (41%) years old. All the students have been learning English between 8 and 25 years with the majority of them (91%) indicating a period between 10 and 16 years.

### **Materials and Procedures**

The study is based on a pen-and-paper questionnaire carried out in person at both universities. The quantitative part is made of 23 scalar judgments, presented in the results section for brevity reasons, and 6 close-ended responses to the following questions:

1. If I were to study pronunciation only, the best place would be:  
*USA, Australia, England, Canada, New Zealand, my home country, another* (Kang, 2010, 2015);
2. The English accent I prefer is:  
*American, Australian, British, Canadian, New Zealand, Irish* (Kang, 2010, 2015);
3. When you have problems communicating in English, is it more likely because of  
*a language problem, a pronunciation problem, a combination of the two?* (Derwing, 2003);
4. Do you know what your main pronunciation problems are?  
*yes/no* (Derwing, 2003)
5. If you answered ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with reference to the statement “When I speak English, I sometimes feel discriminated against because of my accent” which comment below is the closest to your accent: *hard-to-understand, foreign, Macedonian/Polish, another (what, for example)?*

6. If you answered 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with reference to the statement "I have been complimented on my accent in the English language" which comment below is the closest to that compliment: *impressive, native-like, non-Polish, more proper than native, showing-off, another (what, for example)?*

In these general accounts of pronunciation instruction selected items from Derwing's (2003) and Kang (2010, 2015) accent questionnaires were adopted with some minute modifications. For example, in Derwing (2003) communication problems were divided into a language or a pronunciation problem unlike in this study, in which a third category of a combination of a language and pronunciation problems is added.

## Data Analysis

When it comes to the statistical method that was implemented in the evaluation of scalar statements (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree), first, the descriptive statistics, that is the mean and standard error as well as p-value, were calculated for individual judgments for both groups of respondents respectively and then the Mann–Whitney *U* test was applied.

## RESULTS

The description of findings starts with quantitative results for statistically significant and non-significant statements, then it continues with the discussion of close-ended responses.

### Statements

The first question asked if Macedonian and Polish students' attitudes towards 23 selected aspects of learning English pronunciation are similar or different and if in general these findings reveal the participants' penchant for the Nativeness or Intelligibility principle (Levis, 2005, 2020).

### Statistically significant differences between Macedonians and Poles

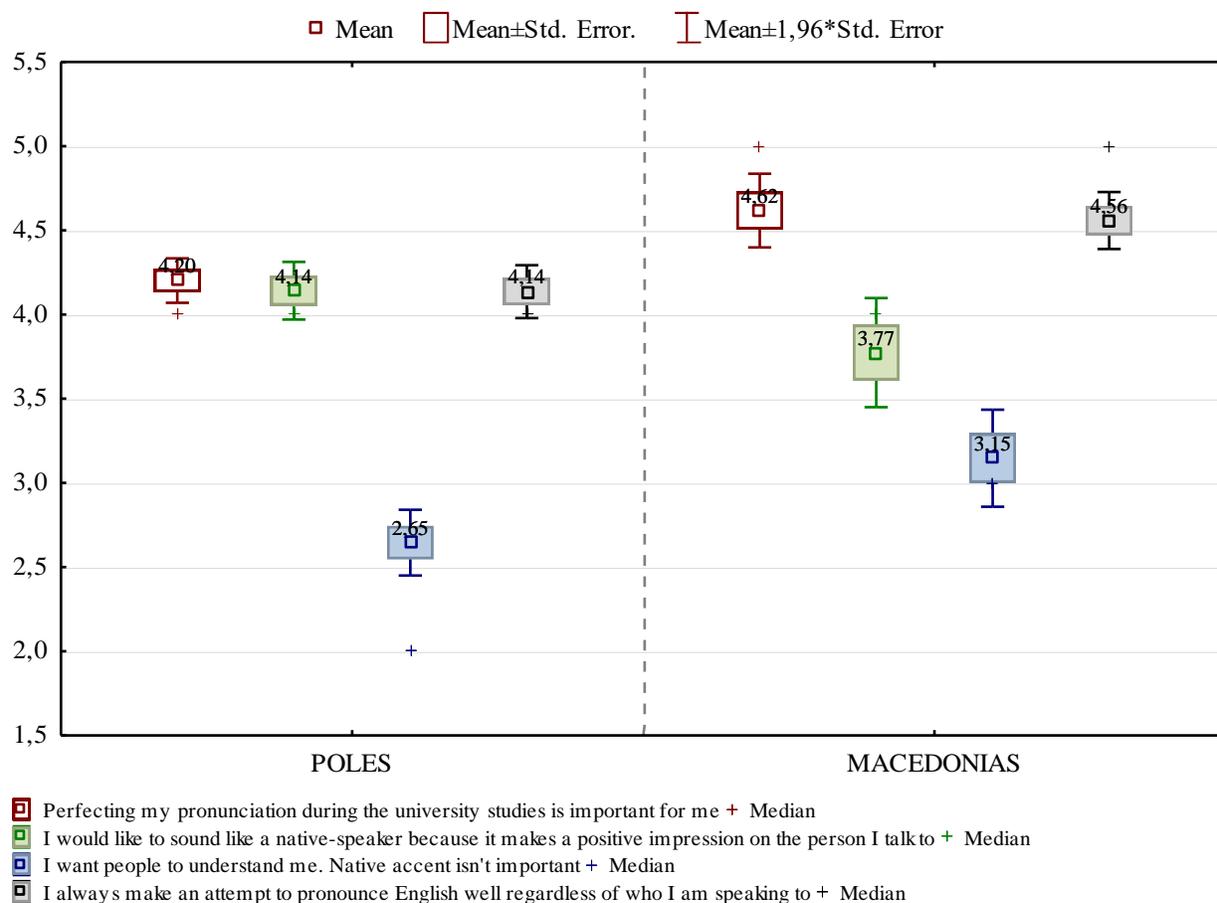
First, we focus on statistically significant differences between the Polish and Macedonian respondents in statements on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The results show that the Macedonians and Polish students' opinions differ in only four out of twenty-three statements, which are presented in Figure 1. In three of four cases, represented by red, grey and blue, the mean values are higher and standard error is smaller for the Macedonian students. Here we have:

- "Perfecting my pronunciation during the university studies is important for me." (MK:  $4.62 \pm 0.65$ ; PL:  $4.20 \pm 0.70$ ,  $p=0.0008$ ),
- "I always make an attempt to pronounce English well regardless of who I am speaking to." (MK:  $4.56 \pm 0.50$ ; PL:  $4.14 \pm 0.84$ ,  $p=0.0090$ ); and
- "I want people to understand me. Native accent isn't important." (MK:  $3.15 \pm 0.86$ ; PL:  $2.65 \pm 1.05$ ,  $p=0.0095$ ).

However, the opposite is true for the statement in green: "I would like to sound like a native-speaker because it makes a positive impression on the person I talk to." (PL:  $4.14 \pm 0.90$ ; MK:  $3.77 \pm 0.92$ ,  $p=0.0311$ ) for which the Polish respondents obtain a higher mean, which means that they find it more important.

**Figure 1**

*Statistically significant differences between Macedonians and Poles in statements*



**Statistically non-significant differences between Macedonians and Poles**

Non-significant differences between the two groups are observed in nineteen statements (Table 1), which in the text are referred to as, for example, “S.1” in the case of statement number 1. Among other things, it turns out that the informants tend to support the nativeness principle rather than intelligibility – represented in statements marked grey in the table below – which can be seen, for example in: a low mean value of around 2.6 for the statement: “I don't mind speaking English with a Polish/Macedonian accent,” (S.16) as well as: a higher mean value, ranging from around 3 to 4.5, for such judgments as:

- “The goal of a pronunciation program should be to eliminate, as much as possible, foreign accents.” (S.9, PL:  $3.48 \pm 1.08$ , MK:  $3.26 \pm 1.05$ ,  $p=0.3434$ );
- “I don't want to speak English with a foreign accent.” (S.18, PL:  $3.53 \pm 1.04$ , MK:  $3.47 \pm 1.13$ ,  $p=0.8619$ );
- “If it were possible, I would like to pronounce English like a native speaker” (S.2, PL:  $4.48 \pm 0.66$ , MK:  $4.24 \pm 0.78$ ,  $p=0.0946$ ).

Another observation we can make, on the basis of the judgments marked orange, is that both groups of the respondents do not report feeling discriminated against because of their accent and losing a part of their Polish/Macedonian identity as a result of using nativelike pronunciation. They also do not believe that native speakers dislike foreigners who try too hard to sound nativelike.

The remaining statements on the white background, (with a mean value of over 4.00 for both groups) indicate that: the informants want to work on their pronunciation, find it important to pronounce English well and regard communicative practice in real life situations as the best way to learn pronunciation. In addition, they attempt to pronounce English well regardless of the speaker (whether native or non-native, peer or teacher) and believe that it has a positive effect on comprehensibility as well as on their own confidence level.

Three statements on the white background obtain a mean lower than 4, which shows that the respondents are undecided. In more detail, they have no opinion on whether their effort to pronounce English well might lead to being respected more by native speakers (S.4). They cannot recollect being complimented on their accent in English (S.6) and do not confirm a belief that their reason for sounding native-like lies in their perfectionism (S.17).

**Table 1**

*Statistically non-significant differences between Macedonians and Poles*

No.	Statement:	Polish $\bar{x} \pm \sigma$	Macedonians $\bar{x} \pm \sigma$	<i>p</i> ( <i>t</i> )
1.	I want to improve the way I sound.	4.53 ± 0.57	4.26 ± 0.75	0.0690
2.	If it were possible, I would like to pronounce English like a native speaker.	4.48 ± 0.66	4.24 ± 0.78	0.0946
3.	I believe it is important to pronounce English well.	4.52 ± 0.52	4.65 ± 0.54	0.1746
4.	Native speakers will respect me more if I pronounce English well.	3.73 ± 1.00	3.55 ± 0.83	0.2198
5.	Learning pronunciation should help me be understood by my listeners.	4.36 ± 0.59	4.24 ± 0.55	0.2317
6.	I have been complimented on my accent in the English language.	3.21 ± 1.04	3.45 ± 1.03	0.2509
7.	Communicative practice, in real life situations, is the best way to learn pronunciation.	4.14 ± 0.92	4.35 ± 0.77	0.2572
8.	Speaking with good English pronunciation makes me more confident in English.	4.56 ± 0.67	4.41 ± 0.78	0.3042
9.	The goal of a pronunciation program should be to eliminate, as much as possible, foreign accents.	3.48 ± 1.08	3.26 ± 1.05	0.3434
10.	I make an attempt to pronounce English well when I talk to native speakers of English.	4.49 ± 0.55	4.59 ± 0.50	0.4021
11.	When I speak English I sometimes feel discriminated against because of my accent.	2.35 ± 0.91	2.24 ± 1.02	0.4174
12.	I make an attempt to pronounce English well when I talk to Polish/Macedonian teachers.	4.30 ± 0.63	4.35 ± 0.69	0.5397
13.	I make an attempt to pronounce English well when I talk to other non-native speakers of English.	4.33 ± 0.62	4.32 ± 0.84	0.5662
14.	I make an attempt to pronounce English well when I talk to my Polish/Macedonian peers.	4.03 ± 0.83	4.15 ± 0.61	0.6136
15.	I wouldn't like to sound like a native because I believe native speakers dislike foreigners who try too hard to sound like them.	2.34 ± 0.95	2.47 ± 1.13	0.6503
16.	I don't mind speaking English with a Polish/Macedonian accent.	2.64 ± 1.11	2.59 ± 1.21	0.7199
17.	I want to sound like a native-speaker because I'm a perfectionist and that includes my pronunciation.	3.87 ± 0.98	3.77 ± 1.12	0.7834
18.	I don't want to speak English with a foreign accent.	3.53 ± 1.04	3.47 ± 1.13	0.8619
19.	If I spoke like a native speaker I would lose a part of my Polish/Macedonian identity.	1.90 ± 1.07	1.82 ± 0.83	0.9211

## Close-ended responses

More quantitative results are obtained by means of responses to the close-ended questions. In general, the Polish respondents show a slight preference for British over American English (49% vs. 46%), unlike the Macedonians for whom the reverse is true (54% select American English, 43% - British English). 5% of Poles also express their inclination towards such varieties as: Australian (1%), New Zealand (1%), Irish (1%), American, Australian and Canadian (1%) as well as American and British (1%) while only one Macedonian opts for Irish. This goes in line with the selection of the best place to study pronunciation, which for Poles is England (50%) and then the USA (43%) unlike for Macedonians who vote for the USA (52%) and England (48%). The remaining 7% of Poles also list Australia (4%), Canada (1%), New Zealand (1%), or a group of three countries such as: the USA, England and Canada (1%).

Both groups display low awareness of their own pronunciation difficulties as only 31% indicate that they know what their main pronunciation problems are. When asked to reflect on the nature of their problems when communicating in English, the two groups of informants prioritize the specified elements differently and attribute them to: a pronunciation problem (M: 39% vs. P: 20%), a foreign language-related problem (M: 32% vs. 49%) and a combination of the two, i.e. phonetic and non-phonetic mistakes (M: 29% vs. P: 31%). This contrasts with Derwing (2003) where 55% of intermediate proficiency ESL learners admitted that pronunciation played a role in communication breakdown.

When it comes to the reactions to the informants' accent in English, it turns out that it was more often complimented on rather than discriminated against, as 47% of Macedonians and 44% of Poles state that their accent was mainly considered: impressive (M: 69% vs. P: 45%), native-like (M: 25% vs. P: 32.5%), non-L1, non-Macedonian/non-Polish respectively (M: 6% vs. P: 12.5%), showing-off (M: 0% vs. P: 7.5%) and great (M: 0% vs. P: 2.5%). A small proportion of the two cohorts, 21% of Macedonians and 14% of Poles, felt discriminated against when their own accent was named: foreign (M: 57% vs. P: 67%) or L1, Polish/Macedonian respectively (M: 43% vs. P: 27%) or hard to understand (P: 7%).

## DISCUSSION

This paper offers some insight into pronunciation instruction in two European countries. Macedonians and Polish respondents share similar views on their own pronunciation in English. As hypothesized, the majority of the first-year English majors support the nativeness principle as they aspire to a native-speaker norm. In addition, the respondents would like to speak English with a native accent, which in their opinion, would have neither a negative effect on their identity nor would it result in native speakers' disapproval (cf. Derwing, 2003). This finding also concurs with, for example, Henderson et al. (2012), in which the teachers' perception of their students' aspiration to have native or near-native pronunciation obtained a mean of 3.02 for seven European countries, from the lowest mean of 2.6 for Spain to the highest one of 3.34 for North Macedonia.

Attaining native-like phonetic proficiency has consistently been a goal of many EFL and ESL

learners all over the world, especially among the students of English, for example, 95% of respondents in Derwing (2003). Although a combination of intelligibility and comprehensibility is a more pragmatic goal, nativeness remains an unbeatable ideal. For reasons of brevity, only one example of the most recent pronunciation survey per country confirming the preference for native models is listed here, both in inner circle countries,<sup>1</sup> for instance, the USA (Zoss, 2015), USA/NZ (Kang, 2010) and also in expanding ones, for example, in Belgium (Meerleer, 2012), Bulgaria (Dimitrova & Chernogorova, 2012), Czech Republic (Jakšič & Šturm, 2017), Croatia (Šišić, 2016), Denmark (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006), Finland (Lintunen & Mäkilähde, 2018), Norway (Rindal & Piercy, 2013), Poland (Szymańska-Tworek & Sycz-Opoń, 2020), Serbia (Paunović, 2009), Spain (Calvo Benzie, 2013), Sweden (Vidén, 2018), Turkey (Pullen, 2012) as well as in Asia: Iran (Galbat & Fahandezh Sa'adi, 2018). Furthermore, attitudes of 'nativeness' are reported to alter after formal pronunciation training, in the direction of more leniency toward non-native accents (Lintunen & Mäkilähde, 2018; Waniek-Klimczak et al. 2015). Kaypak & Ortaçtepe (2014) in a study with 53 Turkish Erasmus students saw that their original commitment toward native-like English was modified during the Erasmus stay, for the benefit of intelligibility at a cost of accuracy. Levis, Sonsaat and Link (2017) observe a preference for native rather than non-native pronunciation teachers although an accentedness and comprehensibility test revealed that the respondents were unsuccessful at discriminating native, near-native and non-native accents and in general the informants appeared to rely more on speakers' proficiency and their ability to speak well rather than on their accent.

This study also proves that the respondents make an attempt at good pronunciation regardless of the interlocutors (whether native or non-native, peers or teachers), they want to improve the way they sound (which is consistent with Kang, 2010) and they are aware that speaking with good pronunciation leads to better comprehensibility, more confidence in English (cf. Kang, 2010), respect on the part of native speakers (cf. Derwing, 2003 – 53%) and a positive impression on the interlocutor. Similarly, Kang (2015) in a study with 617 learners in three circles of World Englishes, notes that all of them wish to sound native-like, improve their pronunciation, and are more confident when their pronunciation is good. In addition, inner circle participants exhibited stronger aspirations in each of the above-mentioned cases than outer and expanding circle students.

As regards the best places to study pronunciation, the informants' opinions differ – the Poles select England while the Macedonians prefer the USA. Accordingly, the most preferred accents of English are British for the Poles and American for Macedonians. This agrees with the findings of Henderson et al. (2012) on teachers' evaluation of their students' preference for variety. In Macedonia GA prevailed (77% for receptive versus 100% for productive work) unlike in Poland where RP was reported to be used to the same degree as GA in receptive tasks (67%) and a little more frequently than GA in productive tasks (RP: 67%, GA: 50%). Another of their findings from seven countries revealed that in the case of teachers RP was the dominant form for both reception (91.63%) and production (84.2%) and was followed by GA (70.73% for receptive vs. 53.84% for productive practice). Teachers appeared to recognize that GA might be more popular amongst students but the

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<sup>1</sup> In Kachru's (1992) model of three circles of English, English is spoken as:

- a native language (ENL) in the inner circle countries, e.g. the USA or Canada,
- a second language (ESL) in the outer circle countries, e.g. South Africa or Pakistan,
- a foreign language (EFL) in the expanding circle countries, e.g. Northern Macedonia and Poland.

difference was less clear-cut (receptive work RP: 64.53%, GA: 66.69%; productive work RP: 55.24%, GA: 63.35%). In addition, Kang (2010) observed that for the respondents in the USA the best place to study pronunciation turned out to be the country they were in, that is America (65%) unlike in New Zealand where learners' opinions were divided as they opted for: their home country (30%), the USA (26.3%), England (16.7%) or New Zealand (10%). Kang (2015) found that in inner (USA, NZ) and expanding circles (Japan and South Korea) USA was preferred over UK unlike in the outer circle (South Africa and Pakistan), which showed more variance: UK (38), home country (30), USA (26) and others (7).

Finally, we find it appropriate to review Galbat and Fahandezh Sa'adi's (2018) study on the pronunciation attitudes of 50 teachers in Iran, which yielded similar results. 86% of them found it important to sound like a native English speaker. 76% of the respondents did not feel that speaking with a native-like accent would threaten their identity. 60% believed communicating well was more important than using a native-like accent. 68% were of the opinion that people would respect them more if they spoke English with a nice accent. However, these informants, unlike the Polish and Macedonians, were undecided on whether accent plays a role in their communication problems (38% agree, 24% neutral, 38% disagree).

A more focused aim or the implementation of a replication study would allow for a more thorough analysis and more straightforward comparison of the data. At the same time, it is hoped that these findings might broaden our understanding of different aspects of pronunciation instruction from the point of view of learners.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks go to all the volunteers, students from Stip, Macedonia and the students of the University of Rzeszow, Poland for participating in the research.

I am also grateful to my friend Katarzyna Laskowska-Chudy for her invaluable assistance with the statistics.

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