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Pronunciation of Czech secondary school English teachers and their cognition about pronunciation

Lenka Čtvrtečková
Charles University, Prague

Ondřej Fischer
Charles University, Prague

Radek Skarnitzl
Charles University, Prague

Language teachers undoubtedly serve as important models of their learners' pronunciation. The recent growth of interest in teacher cognition also raises the question to what extent non-native English teachers' cognition about pronunciation and pronunciation teaching are aligned with their own production (from a contrastive perspective) and accent preference. In the present study, we first analysed recordings of 12 Czech secondary school teachers of English obtained directly in class. Auditory analyses revealed characteristic pronunciation features of Czech-accented English at the segmental level (e.g., vowel quality, dental fricatives, the presence of a plosive following the velar nasal, aspiration), while vowel reduction and linking were realised in a more native-like manner than by strongly accented speakers examined in previous studies. Results obtained from questionnaires investigating teachers' cognition indicated their positive attitude towards authentic input, hierarchisation of pronunciation features, and prioritisation of intelligibility in pronunciation teaching. A comparison with the teachers' overall accentedness suggested that more strongly accented participants were more convinced about the importance of native-like attainment and pronunciation teaching itself than their colleagues with a more mild-accented English. Furthermore, the results indicate only a weak relationship between teachers' accent preference and rhoticity in their own speech production.

Keywords: pronunciation teaching, teacher cognition, foreign accent, Czech accent in English, language transfer



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1 Introduction

This study deals with non-native teacher cognition in teaching English as a foreign language. More specifically, it focuses on questions related to pronunciation teaching practices, aims in pronunciation instruction, the assigned value of the instruction itself and preferences in model accent. Furthermore, teachers' own pronunciation is analysed with reference to the typical features of Czech-accented English. Since teachers serve as models to their learners, the aim was to see whether their attitudes towards pronunciation are reflected in their speech production during teaching.

2 Previous research

2.1 Teaching pronunciation and teacher cognition

The current study on teacher cognition in pronunciation teaching (i.e., on their beliefs and knowledge about pronunciation teaching) explores how Czech English teachers' pronunciation and beliefs develop on an individual basis, reflecting how they are strongly tied to context and environment, and whether changes in cognition are linear, contrary to Burri and Baker's findings (2021).

Research has shown that teachers who receive training on how to teach pronunciation planned their teaching in a more systematic way (Nagle et al., 2018), and reported greater confidence when teaching it (Kochem & Levis, 2022). In Couper (2016), teachers reported that despite their knowledge of phonetics and phonology, they did not feel they had been trained enough in *how* to teach pronunciation and thus, tended to ignore the areas that were difficult for them to describe, e.g. stress and intonation. Couper also points out that teachers regarded intelligibility and accurate pronunciation on the segmental level as their objectives.

The question of how to train future teachers specifically in relation to pronunciation teaching has been gaining significant attention by researchers (Levis & Sonsaat, 2019), with studies examining, e.g., a) teachers' confidence and self-consciousness, b) constraints related to time and/or teaching materials, c) types of instruction, and d) appropriate models depending on whether the overall goal is pronunciation that is either intelligible or native-like.

Studies repeatedly report that second language teachers often lack confidence in pronunciation teaching despite their desire to address it in class (Baker, 2013; Guerra, 2017; Levis & Sonsaat, 2019). As a result, pronunciation might receive less attention in class than grammar or vocabulary skills (Burri & Baker, 2020), with feedback relegated to the level of reactive ad hoc corrections (Burri & Baker, 2020, 2021) that lack systematic approach. Tight schedules and the obligation to cover a particular syllabus are limiting factors which many teachers mention (e.g., Sicola & Darcy, 2015), but – as Darcy et al. (2020) have shown – it is possible to incorporate pronunciation activities into existing syllabi without compromising the overall course goals.

A number of varieties of English have been proposed as models for pronunciation teaching, as no single model is unequivocally suitable for all learners and purposes (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2018). In ELT textbooks, Received Pronunciation (RP; today also referred to as Standard British English, SBE) is often adopted as a point of reference, yet generally unaccompanied by a clear reasoning (Upton, 2015). In the European context, Ivanová (2011) sees SBE as a beneficial pronunciation model for several reasons: its prestigious status; its dominance of learning and teaching materials, including dictionaries; and the notion that it is fairly easily comprehensible compared to other regional varieties of the British Isles. However, the comprehensibility of a particular variety will, to some extent, depend on the sound patterns of the learner's L1, as well as the listener's. For instance, in the Czech context, Kobák (2017)

found somewhat lower intelligibility of standard British presumably due to the absence of rhoticity. Another variety that English learners are frequently exposed to through the Internet, film and music is General American (GA). Czech learners predominantly rated GA favourably in terms of pleasantness, comprehensibility, and status (Jakšič, 2018). This begs the question of what model Czech learners should aim for, and thus, what pronunciation features teachers should devote time to, e.g., is non-rhoticity a 'necessary' feature if one wants to be intelligible and favourably perceived?

In general, addressing pronunciation in class may be even more challenging for non-native teachers due to their lack of confidence. However, as shown by Guerra's (2017) study of Portuguese university students, learners might hold both native and non-native teachers in equally high esteem, evaluating them in relation to other traits – e.g., pedagogical competence or interactional skills – instead of merely their degree of accentedness. Therefore, a useful first step is to compare teachers' cognition with their actual spoken English, which is the aim of the present study.

2.2 Czech-accented English

The nature of this study necessitates a contrastive approach, and individual pronunciation features will be treated in this paper without considering their impact on comprehensibility. Czech speakers may struggle with a number of segmental or suprasegmental aspects of English, and these were described in detail by Skarnitzl and Rumlová (2019, see also references therein); only a brief summary will be presented here.

The English vowel system is considerably more complex, especially in the open region with front /æ/ and back /ɒ/ likely to be challenging for Czech speakers of English. They are typically replaced by mid vowels [ɛ] and [ɔ] respectively. While overall consonantal complexity seems to be greater in Czech, the English dental fricatives are typically realised incorrectly, especially the voiced /ð/ as [d]. In addition, the velar /ŋ/ is frequently followed by a velar stop /k/ in Czech-accented English.

With word stress in Czech being fixed on the first syllable of the prosodic word, Czech speakers of English may also place stress word-initially in their L2 English even in words stressed on another syllable. In addition, Czech has no systematic vowel reduction, so vowels tend to be realised as full in their quality, even in unstressed syllables in Czech-accented English. In Czech, words beginning with a vowel tend to be accompanied by a glottal stop and linking of two successive words is therefore not too common in Czech-accented English. In general, prosodic signalling is rather weak in Czech, with the stressed syllable bearing no typical signs of acoustic prominence, prosodic phrases being much longer than in English and pitch range being considerably narrower (Skarnitzl & Hledíková, 2022; Volín et al., 2015).

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

While research on teacher cognition in English pronunciation teaching mostly addresses native speakers of English (e.g., Baker, 2013; Baker & Burri, 2016; Couper, 2016), more needs to be known about the thoughts, beliefs and knowledge of non-native speakers in countries where English is not the predominant L1. The present study therefore focuses on Czech L2 teachers' cognition concerning certain aspects of pronunciation teaching. In addition, we analyse teachers' own in-class pronunciation and compare relevant pronunciation features with some aspects of their cognition to see whether there is a relationship between the two. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1:** What are the cognitions of Czech teachers of English towards pronunciation teaching?
- RQ2:** Does their pronunciation in lessons align with the previous research of Czech-accented English? Are teachers' cognitions and their in-class production somehow interconnected?

3.2 Participants and recordings

Our sample of teachers consisted of 12 participants (F = 9; M = 3), professional teachers of English and native speakers of Czech. Half of them worked and resided in the capital city, Prague, the other half in the smaller Moravian city of Opava. Eight of these teachers taught at grammar schools, the remaining four at vocational secondary schools. Their average age was 41 years (ranging between 27 and 53), with the average length of teaching experience 15.5 years (ranging from 5–27). All but one possessed an MA degree in English.

The teachers were recorded during their regular English lessons using a lavalier microphone. This facilitated high-quality recordings, while the visual unobtrusiveness of the device also helped to mitigate both teachers' and students' potential anxiety about the recording situation. All of our participants signed an informed consent and volunteered for the research, even though they were not informed about its specific focus (i.e., pronunciation) before the recording itself, given that such information could have impaired the authenticity of their production.

The recordings were later edited to teacher talking time only, excluding especially longer pauses and any audible speech by students. We selected three approximately ninety-second excerpts from each of the recordings – one from the beginning, one from the middle and one from the final part of every lesson – to obtain a balanced sample of every teacher's pronunciation. The resulting material, consisting of about 290 seconds of speech per participant, was used in the pronunciation analysis.

3.3 Pronunciation analysis and questionnaires

Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2021) was used to analyse pronunciation features which are typical of the Czech accent in English (see §2.2). The features were evaluated using careful auditory analysis by the first two authors of this study after a joint calibration session; for potential controversies the last author was consulted. Some of the features were analysed in a binary way (e.g., vowel reduction, linking), some in a ternary manner, with an intermediate realisation possible (e.g., /ð/ realised as dental stop [d̪]). The assessment criteria are described in Table 1. A standardised success score in the range from 0 (strongly accented) to 1 (native-like) was calculated for each of the pronunciation features analysed, with the intermediate realisation of a ternary distinction corresponding to 0.5. Each participant's comprehensive score (0 to 1) was then calculated as the average of the scores obtained for the nine individual features.

Additionally, a questionnaire comprising 14 questions (in Czech; see Appendix for the English translation) regarding cognitions about English pronunciation teaching was distributed to our participants after the in-class recording. Answers were marked on a five-point scale, with items 1–6 evaluated in terms of importance on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), and items 7–14 asking for a degree of agreement with a statement from “definitely not” (value 1) to “definitely yes” (value 5). Pearson correlations were used to check relationships between the teachers' pronunciation and aspects of their cognition.

Table 1

Assessment of Analysed Pronunciation Features

Feature	Native-like	Intermediate	Czech-accented
/ð/	[ð]	[ɖ]	[d]
/θ/	[θ]	[t̪]	[t], [f], [s] ...
/r/	[ɹ], [ɹ̥], [ʁ]	[ɹ~r]	[r], [r]
/w/	[w], in <i>wh-</i> also [ʍ]	[v]	[v]
/ŋ/	[ŋ], in <i>-ing</i> also [n]	-	[ŋk], [ŋg]
/æ/	[æ]	[æ~ɛ]	[ɛ], [e]
/ə/	[ə]	-	full vowel
aspiration	present	-	absent
linking	linked	-	glottalised

4 Data analysis and results

4.1 Teachers' pronunciation

The auditory analysis revealed that the pronunciation of our sample of secondary school teachers in the Czech Republic does not differ considerably from the strongly accented speakers examined by Skarnitzl and Rumlová (2019). As shown in Table 2, which lists the mean scores of individual pronunciation features analysed in this study in a descending order from most accurate to least accurate, the approximants /w/ and /r/ were produced most accurately by our teachers. A stark contrast appears within the dental fricatives, where the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ was accurately pronounced in nearly 90% of items, whereas its voiced counterpart /ð/ turned out to be one of the most problematic sounds for our speakers, with a comprehensive score of 0.38 accurately pronounced items. The voiced /ð/ was typically realised as an alveolar stop, [d], less frequently also as a dental stop, [ɖ]; a more detailed analysis reveals that the pronunciation tended to be slightly more native-like in lexical words (e.g., *Southern, weather*) than grammatical words (e.g., *the, that, they*). Given previous studies which addressed the open front vowel /æ/ in Czech speakers of English, it is not surprising that this sound was mostly pronounced as a considerably higher vowel [ɛ] and scored lowest in our sample. The score of the remaining segmental features – /ŋ/ and aspiration of voiceless stops – was slightly above 0.5. As for the suprasegmental features, results show that linking did not occur frequently in the speech of the teachers, with glottalisation occurring in over one half of the possible contexts. Finally, vowel reduction occurred in about 60% of the examined items, the only value which is considerably higher than in the study reported by Skarnitzl and Rumlová (2019).

Table 2

Mean Scores of Analysed Pronunciation Features

Feature	Mean score
w	0.94
r	0.91
θ	0.89
ŋ	0.62
vowel reduction	0.61
aspiration	0.54
linking	0.46
ð	0.38
æ	0.19

To assess the pronunciation of individual teachers (T), a comprehensive accentedness score was calculated in the form of a weighted average of the analysed pronunciation features. The score reveals a range between 0.42 for T07 and 0.77 for T08 (see Table 3). Additional analysis was carried out to test whether the comprehensive accentedness scores would correlate with teachers' age, sex, length of teaching experience, type of school (grammar school vs. vocational school), or residence (the capital Prague vs. smaller Opava). However, no noteworthy relationships were revealed between the score and any of these variables.

Table 3

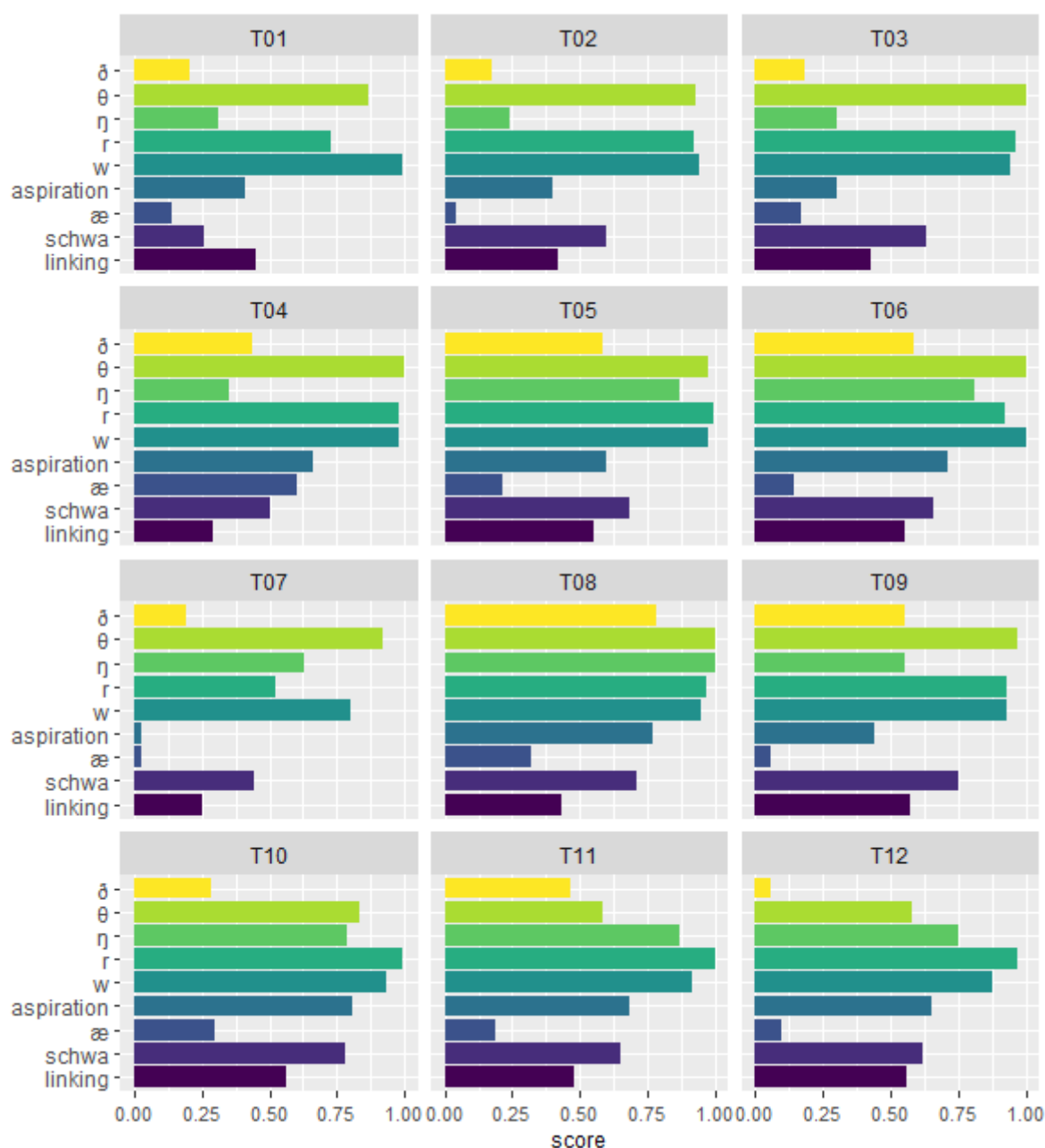
Accentedness Scores of Individual Teachers

Teacher	Comprehensive accentedness score
T01	0.48
T02	0.52
T03	0.55
T04	0.64
T05	0.72
T06	0.71
T07	0.42
T08	0.77
T09	0.64
T10	0.70
T11	0.65
T12	0.57

It is to be expected that the comprehensive accentedness scores conceal considerable individual variability, and that two similar scores are likely to be a product of different partial scores (see Skarnitzl & Rumlová, 2019). Figure 1 confirms such expectations. Speakers T04 and T09, with an identical score of 0.64, may serve as examples, with differences in the suprasegmental features but also the open front vowel. The realisation of the voiced /ð/ appears to be the feature which shows particularly high between-speaker variability, as does the pronunciation of the velar nasal /ŋ/ with or without a following plosive sound.

Figure 1

Scores of Nine Pronunciation Features in Individual Teachers

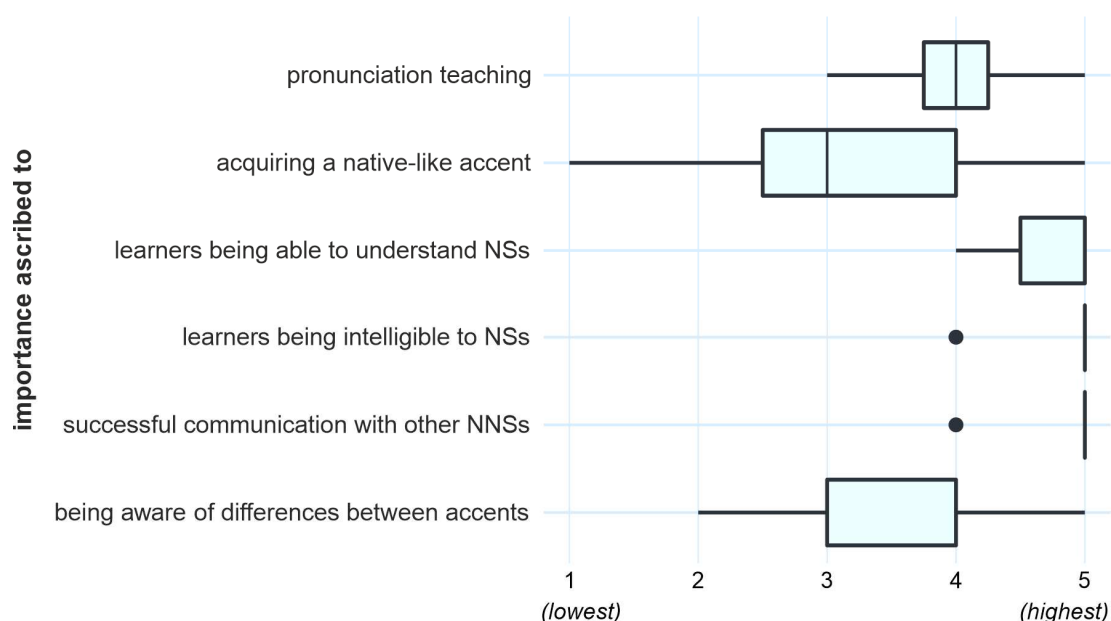


4.2 Teachers' cognition

The first set of questions addressed the importance which the teachers ascribed to various objectives in pronunciation teaching. As can be seen in the topmost boxplot of Figure 2, most of our teachers expressed belief in the importance of pronunciation teaching in general ($M = 4.0$): six teachers assigned pronunciation score 4, three teachers an average level of importance ($M = 3$) and the other three attributed the highest level to it. When we compare intelligibility vs. native-like production as the goal of pronunciation teaching, the teachers' evaluation of objectives 2–5 suggests that intelligibility is regarded as more important. Learners' acceptable intelligibility in speaking with and being understood by native speakers were both evaluated as important ($M = 4.73$ and $M = 4.91$, respectively), as was successful communication with other non-native speakers ($M = 4.91$). However, the importance of learners acquiring an almost native-like accent was seen as much less important ($M = 3.18$, with scores covering the entire evaluation range). An awareness of differences between various accents of English was also ascribed average importance ($M = 3.55$).

Figure 2

Scores of Importance Ascribed by the Teachers to Pronunciation Teaching Objectives



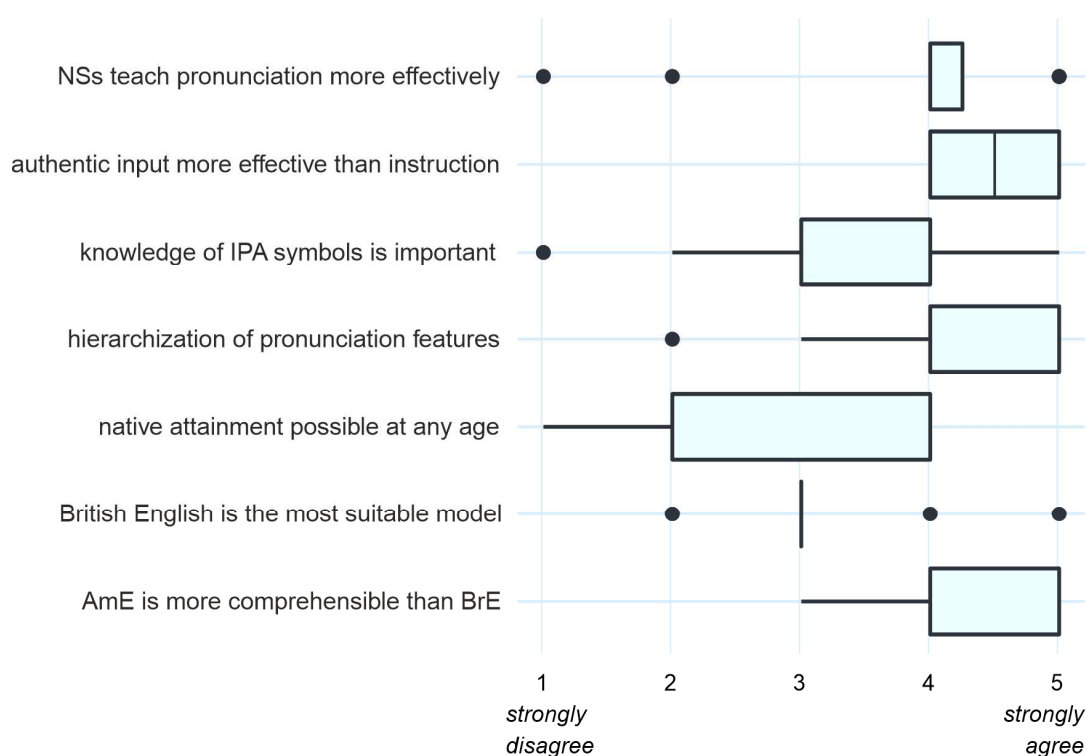
Note. NSs = native speakers, NNSs = non-native speakers.

In the second set of questions, the respondents were asked to express the degree of their agreement with various statements related to pronunciation teaching. The results are presented in Figure 3. These responses seem to be more varied. The most unequivocal question concerned input: teachers predominantly consider authentic input as a more ~~effective~~ ^{efficient} means of acquiring English pronunciation than in-class instruction ($M = 4.5$). The opinion that some aspects of pronunciation are more important to effective communication than others, and that it is therefore important to teach pronunciation features in a hierarchical order, was also predominantly assumed ($M = 4.17$). Most teachers agreed that native speakers' ability to teach pronunciation is better than that of non-native speakers ($M = 3.83$); in contrast, two teachers

expressed disagreement with this statement. The belief that learners should be familiar with transcription symbols was acknowledged by the majority of teachers ($M = 3.58$), with two teachers disagreeing with the importance of transcription. The teachers were most sceptical about the possibility of acquiring a native-like accent at any age ($M = 3.17$). The responses related to English variety preferences showed that teachers on average do not regard British English as the most suitable pronunciation model ($M = 3.08$) and mostly find American English more comprehensible, i.e. easier to understand ($M = 4.17$).

Figure 3

Agreement with Statements Concerning Pronunciation Teaching



Note. NSs = native speakers, BrE = British English, AmE = American English.

4.3 Teachers' cognition vis-à-vis pronunciation

Additional analysis was carried out to compare teachers' pronunciation with some of the items from the cognition questionnaire and their demographics.

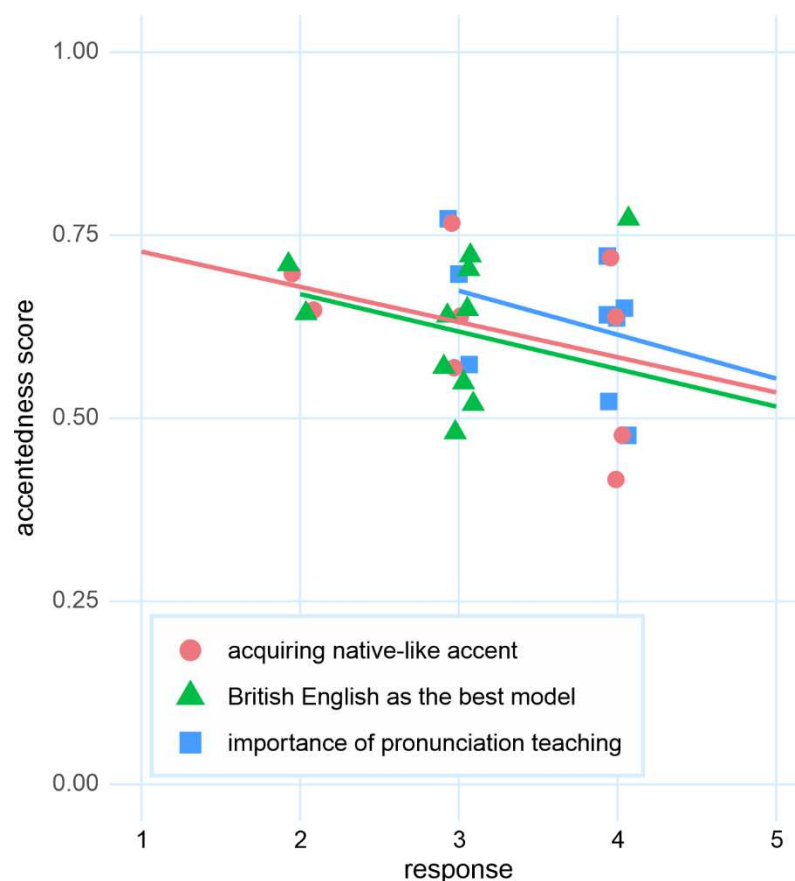
Regarding the comprehensive accentedness score, our data reveal no significant correlations of the accentedness score (see Table 2 above) with the teachers' age, experience with teaching English, the type of school, or the region where they teach. In addition, the accentedness score does not correlate with the importance ascribed to pronunciation teaching.

The results of the relationship between the accentedness score with the teachers' cognition (see Figure 4 indicate weak negative correlations ($-0.35 < r < -0.5$) between the accentedness score on the one hand and, on the other hand, the importance ascribed to the importance of pronunciation teaching, native-like attainment, and British English being the most suitable model. In other words, more teachers with a strong Czech-accented English believed that

pronunciation teaching is important and that learners should attain native-like accent, compared to those with a lower accentedness score.

Figure 4

Relationship between Accentedness Score and the Importance Ascribed to Three Phenomena



As for the relationship between the preferred accent and the teachers' rhoticity in their own pronunciation, one half of the teachers expressed preference for a general British accent. Three of these had predominantly non-rhotic pronunciation (with between 25 and 40% of post-vocalic [r] pronounced), the remaining three were rhotic (with over 90% of possible contexts pronounced with [r]). The four teachers who preferred General American were mostly rhotic, as were the two who expressed their preference for Canadian English.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of pronunciation features of Czech secondary school English teachers is in line with the results by Skarnitzl and Rumlová (2019). Concerning segmental features, it is clear that even for secondary school teachers, who are highly proficient in English, the native-like pronunciation of [æ] and [ɔ̃] remains a considerable challenge. While pronouncing [ŋ] without a subsequent plosive seems less demanding, there was considerable individual variance. As for connected speech phenomena and the prosodic domain, Czech teachers did not employ linking very often, which resulted in choppy speech. On the other hand, their use of vowel reduction

was slightly better compared to the results obtained in previous studies on strongly accented Czech speakers of English (Skarnitzl & Rumlová, 2019; Volín et al., 2013).

Data collected from questionnaires showed that, in general, Czech teachers in our sample valued the communicative dimensions of pronunciation (intelligibility and comprehensibility) rather than native-like attainment. While most of the teachers stated that they use British English as a model in class (“because of the textbook”, as some noted), they do not perceive American English as inferior to the former – the majority of the participants even reported American English to be more comprehensible to them. Interestingly, strongly Czech-accented teachers seemed to ascribe higher value to British English, native-like attainment and pronunciation teaching in comparison with their less accented peers, for whom pronunciation teaching appeared to be of a lower priority, and British English along with native-like attainment were not highly valued.

The participants were also rather hesitant about the notion of the teacher serving as a model for pronunciation, about the benefit of in-class pronunciation instruction as compared to authentic input, as well as about the importance of using phonemic transcription in lessons; such views could be related to the low self-confidence of teachers mentioned earlier in the article.

There are certain limitations of the study which should be pointed out. The sample was rather small, consisting of twelve individuals only, which was caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and teachers’ willingness to participate. It was also not balanced in terms of gender, geographical distribution or types of schools. The limited sample may also be the reason why we found no correlations of the teachers’ age, region, the amount of teaching experience, type of secondary school or accent preferences with cognition and pronunciation in class. Alternatively, however, it is conceivable that these variables truly do have little effect on teachers’ pronunciation and cognition. Finally, our results may also portray the situation in a slightly more favourable light: since only teachers who were willing to participate in the study and volunteered for it were recorded, we might expect an average secondary school English teacher in the Czech Republic to have a stronger accent. In future research, it would be interesting to relate teachers’ cognition about pronunciation with their actual practices concerning pronunciation teaching.

The pronunciation of Czech teachers has confirmed the presence of many typical features of Czech-accented English. Importantly, teachers themselves proved they were aware of the importance of intelligibility in pronunciation teaching and noted that not all pronunciation features are equally significant. However, we are convinced that to serve as an effective model, teachers should aim for pronunciation which is comprehensible and does not result in negative social evaluations.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Attained level of education: _____
City of pedagogical practice: _____
Type of school: _____
How long have you been teaching? _____

- 1) If you studied English at university, where was it? (multiple answers are possible)
a faculty of education a faculty of arts Other: _____
- 2) Have you stayed, studied or worked abroad (English-speaking or otherwise) for an extended period of time? If so, where and for how long?

–
- 3) Which of the following varieties of English do you personally find most pleasant?
Received pronunciation General American Australian Canadian
Scottish Irish Other: _____ I do not know
- 4) Do you strive to emulate any of the varieties above in your own speech? If so, which one?

- 5) What variety of English do you teach (British English, American English, other)?

- 6) What variety of English are the teaching materials that you use based on? (multiple answers are possible)
Textbooks _____ (or _____ titles):

Other materials (books, magazines, films, songs...):

- 7) What importance do you attribute to English pronunciation teaching?
(1 – not important, 5 – essential)
1 2 3 4 5
- 8) Please rate the importance of the following objectives for teaching English pronunciation:
(1 – not important, 5 – essential)
 - a) The learner will attain an accent close to the level of a native speaker.
1 2 3 4 5
 - b) The learner will understand the speech of native speakers easily.
1 2 3 4 5

- c) The learner will be easily understood by native speakers.
1 2 3 4 5
- d) The learner will easily communicate with other non-native speakers.
1 2 3 4 5
- e) The learner is aware of the differences between varieties of English.
1 2 3 4 5

9) To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

- a) A native speaker is a better pronunciation teacher than a non-native speaker.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- b) Staying abroad, communication with native speakers or listening to authentic materials are more effective means of attaining English pronunciation than in-class pronunciation instruction.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- c) Learners should be familiar with the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) that are relevant to English. They should be able to associate them with the sounds that they represent.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- d) Certain aspects of pronunciation are more important for successful communication than others.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- e) British English is the most appropriate model for learning English as a foreign language.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- f) It is possible to attain a native-like accent at any age.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes
- e) American English is easier to understand for learners than British English.
definitely not – rather not – don't know – rather yes – definitely yes

About the authors

Lenka Čtvrtečková graduated from the Faculty of Education at Charles University with her bachelor thesis 'Perception of intrusive /r/ by Czech Learners of English' in the programme English Language Focused on Education. She completed a master's at the Institute of Phonetics, which is based at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, with her diploma thesis on teacher cognition in pronunciation teaching.

Email: ctvrteckova.lenka@seznam.cz

Ondřej Fischer studied English and American Studies (BA) and English Language (MA) at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. He also graduated from Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory where he studied composition. He currently works as a radio presenter and music director at a classical music radio station in Prague.

Email: ondrej.fis@gmail.com

Radek Skarnitzl is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, and director of the Institute of Phonetics. He is interested in various aspects of speech communication, with expertise in speech prosody, acoustic phonetics, and second language (L2) acquisition. His research focuses on L2 pronunciation and on the effect of various pronunciation features on the socio-psychological evaluation of a speaker in both native and foreign languages. He is also interested in issues related to speaker identification and forensic phonetics, especially the effects of voice disguise on human and automatic speaker recognition performance.

Email: radek.skarnitzl@ff.cuni.cz