

## Pronunciation and accent-related beliefs, views, and experiences of future teachers in Hungary

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The present study examines the pronunciation- and accent-related beliefs, views, and experiences of future English teachers in Hungary. International research has shown that teaching pronunciation or specific aspects of it might be challenging for teachers (Burns, 2006; Darcy et al., 2012; Levis et al., 2016). To implement any change in the way pronunciation is taught, it is crucial to observe a) whether pronunciation-teaching issues and attitudes to pronunciation development in Hungary are similar to the ones reported in international research, and b) what the current beliefs of future teachers are when it comes to pronunciation learning and teaching. One hundred twenty-eight second-year English teacher trainees were given a questionnaire containing open and closed questions regarding accent, pronunciation, and pronunciation teaching. The present study only looks at some of the open questions. Comments and responses were analyzed qualitatively, and tendencies and categories were extrapolated, focusing on comments that convey teacher trainees' early beliefs and concepts on "correct" pronunciation and their ideas and views about learning and teaching pronunciation. The results indicate that students are optimistic regarding the controllability of pronunciation and sounding native-like; they reported being somewhat, although not entirely, satisfied with their current pronunciation but actively and consciously working on improving it. Their reports also indicate that the amount of feedback on pronunciation received in school is insufficient and very general.

**Keywords:** L2 pronunciation, accent, learner beliefs, pronunciation teaching, self-evaluation

### 1. Introduction

English teachers today are in a difficult position when teaching pronunciation. The questions of what to teach, what materials to use, and how to teach are complex in and of themselves. If they present themselves together, they may easily result in the teacher neglecting pronunciation teaching in the classroom for a lack of time, adequate background knowledge, resources, and personal learning experience. It is one of the significant tasks of teacher training to eliminate the insecurities that stop teachers from developing this aspect of their students' language knowledge, as well as to dedicate class time to questions and problems related to pronunciation. The first step is to learn more about how future teachers see pronunciation-related issues, what they bring with them from their school years, and what techniques they use to improve their pronunciation skills. In this way, it becomes possible to deal with misconceptions, and reinforce their sense of responsibility for their own and their student's pronunciation skill development. The present study aims to uncover the beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and past experiences of future

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English teachers regarding pronunciation. It also attempts to discover how pronunciation teaching happens in Hungarian education through their lens.

## 2. Background

The sheer number of people speaking English as a second language, combined with its unprecedented expansion, has resulted in a heterogeneous and variable language (Mauranen, 2017). Due to this heterogeneity, as Kachru (1992) puts it, “the term ‘English’ does not capture this sociolinguistic reality; the term ‘Englishes’ does” (p. 357). The status of native varieties changed, and the focus shifted to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), that is, “English when it is used as a contact language across linguacultures whose members are in the main so-called non-native speakers” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 157). Therefore, for learners of English, the perfect imitation of native models is no longer the only achievable goal but remains a possibility, influencing both ESL teaching and learning. Students of English seem to have a positive attitude towards ELF (Kalocsai, 2009; Ranta, 2010), but studies show that university students, for example, despite being aware of ELF, still prefer native varieties (Hynninen, 2010; Kontra & Csizér, 2011). As far as teachers are concerned, Illés (2016) points out that “even though teachers of English are aware of the major developments that have taken place in the use of English, they are unsure about how they are to be understood, or how they are to be related to their own teaching practice” (p. 135). Under ideal circumstances, the factors that should be taken into consideration when choosing a variety are, among other things, whether the variety is suitable in a particular context, whether the resources are suitable or available, or whether the variety will be motivating and attainable (Seargeant 2016, p. 20). The reality, however, often overwrites these aspects.

The prestige, omnipresence, and codification of standard British and American Englishes give them an advantage over other varieties, which might be less known and have considerably less material available (Seargeant, 2016). However, taking the native variety as the default option is problematic because it is difficult for adult L2 learners to attain native-like pronunciation (Flege & Fletcher, 1992; Flege et al., 1995; Scovel, 2000) even after instruction (Saito, 2021) and success could depend on how close their L1 is to the target language (Bongaerts et al., 1997; Saito et al., 2020). Therefore, as Derwing and Munro (2005) argue, insisting on it in the classroom could be unrealistic and even harmful to students. Jenkins (2002), furthermore, argues that the “choice of pedagogic model is (or should be) a matter of selecting the NS accent which will have widest currency among the learner’s target (NS) community” (p. 85). This means that in the international community, where most conversations will not necessarily happen with a NS, the focus should be on intelligibility and comprehensibility. As far as accentedness is concerned, “the identification of the features of an accent that interfere with comprehensibility and intelligibility is the key to helping L2 speakers” (Derwing & Munro, 2022, p. 147).

International research has shown that teaching pronunciation or specific aspects of it might be challenging for teachers (Burns, 2006; Foote et al., 2012; Darcy et al., 2012; Levis et al., 2016). The reasons mentioned by teachers include the difficulty of assessment, the lack of teaching and learning materials and curricula, gaps in their phonetics and phonology knowledge, a lack of pedagogical knowledge; moreover, lack of confidence in their pronunciation, and lack of time or lack of appropriate textbooks for teaching pronunciation (MacDonald, 2002; Couper,

2021). All these problems may lead to the absence of systematic pronunciation teaching or possible reliance on coursebooks which are not based on pronunciation research or are not entirely appropriate for the context in which they are used (Derwing & Munro, 2005). To address these problems, MacDonald (2002) recommends the following:

- (1) “Give pronunciation increased prominence within formal curricula, offering detailed guidance for teachers on teaching and learning goals and assessment; develop ‘centre policies’ or a ‘centre culture’ conducive to the teaching of pronunciation.” (p. 12)
- (2) “Redefine the teacher’s role with regard to pronunciation as that of a speech coach responsible for monitoring student speech and encouraging self-monitoring.” (p. 13)
- (3) Develop teachers’ skills in integrating pronunciation, and increase their access to a range of suitable activities for teaching the various elements of pronunciation to students at all levels and from different backgrounds.” (p. 14)

Even if teachers assume a more active role in the classroom regarding pronunciation teaching, they are bound to face challenges. Research has shown that it is difficult to observably change adult L2 pronunciation (Macdonald et al., 1994; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2010), but instruction can be effective in improving certain aspects of it and, consequently, L2 learners’ intelligibility (Derwing et al., 1997, 1998; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Saito & Lyster, 2012), even if learners have fossilized errors (Derwing et al., 1997; Couper 2006, 2011; Derwing & Munro, 2014). Regarding intonation, Kelly (2000) points out that it is believed to be an aspect of language difficult to improve, and given that students are unconsciously sensitive to intonation, they can perceive, understand and use it without more profound analysis, so exposure is often believed to be the best way of acquiring it. However, he emphasizes that “in dealing with intonation in the language classroom, we need to examine the nature of these unconscious processes, bring them to the surface and show how we believe they work” (p. 86). Another useful classroom tool is feedback. In a study on the short-term effects of individual corrective feedback on L2 pronunciation, Dłaska and Krekeler (2013) concluded that ICF (individual corrective feedback) proved to be a more helpful tool in improving L2 comprehensibility than a listening-only intervention (that is when the students only listened to their own recorded pronunciation and after that, the teacher’s model pronunciation).

If pronunciation is to be addressed in the classroom, it is essential to find out which aspects of it have been fruitful in increasing students’ intelligibility and comprehensibility so that limited class time can be used efficiently. As far as segmentals are concerned, in Munro and Derwing’s (2006) study, high functional load errors affected listeners’ perception of accentedness and comprehensibility more than low functional load errors did. Other important aspects affecting comprehensibility include vowel length, initial consonants (Levis, 2018), and suprasegmentals (Derwing et al., 1997; Munro & Derwing, 1995; Hahn, 2004). Word-stress instruction has also been identified as being beneficial to learners (Field, 2005; Waniek-Klimczak, 2015). Stress placement is not always equally crucial for intelligibility, but evidence suggests it has an important role. For example, Jenkins (2002) found that misplaced nuclear stress can affect intelligibility in ELF interactions. Pitch movement and relative pitch level have also been reported to have a prominent role in intelligibility in ELF interaction (Pickering,

2009). For example, a lack of pitch variation makes the speaker seem disinterested and distant (Pickering, 2001).

Coursebooks and materials could be a solid starting point in any pronunciation teaching situation. However, their logic and organization do not necessarily reflect the needs of certain learner groups in different places of the world. For example, in an analysis of L2 ESL general-skills textbook series, Derwing et al. (2012) found that although some series feature a variety of pronunciation task types, others operated only with a limited range of tasks. This calls for a broader range of task types and more explicit explanations featuring more aspects proven helpful in increasing intelligibility.

The issues in today's pronunciation teaching are clear from the above-reviewed research. There is evidence that instruction is effective, and plenty of results show what aspects of pronunciation are worth focusing on. However, materials are not necessarily optimal for achieving these goals yet. In the following, the present study will attempt to determine how the Hungarian situation differs from or aligns with international research by involving teacher trainees. This population is close enough to school to remember good and bad practices but has spent enough time at university to develop their beliefs on pronunciation learning (and possibly teaching), as well as their habits of improving themselves and forming an early opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of their pronunciation learning past.

### 3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection was carried out over two years, from May 2020 to May 2022, as part of a larger research project. A questionnaire was designed based on findings from the reviewed literature (some questions, in particular, were based on Cenoz & Lecumberri (1999) and Derwing & Rossiter (2002)), as well as the author's experience of the problematic areas of L2 speech and pronunciation learning in Hungary in general and among university students in particular. The language of both the questionnaire and the responses was English. The foci of the questionnaire were self-evaluation and views on L2 speech, accent, and pronunciation. It contained twenty questions, nine closed-ended and eleven open-ended questions. Of these, five open-ended questions (the ones pertinent to views on pronunciation) serve as the basis of the present study. The questionnaire was administered in three consecutive years, twice during distance teaching (2020 and 2021) because of COVID-19 and once in a face-to-face teaching situation. In each case, the questionnaire was a take-home assignment for which they had approximately a week. The participants gave consent to have their answers used anonymously for research. One hundred twenty-eight participants filled in the questionnaire: 46 in 2020, 38 in 2021, and 44 in 2022. After each administered round, the questionnaire was revised, and new questions were added to gain more insight into the problems addressed. For this reason, of the five questions discussed below, the first two were answered by all 128 participants. The third and fourth questions were answered by 82 participants, and the fifth question was only inserted into the final (2022) version and thus was answered by 44 participants. The questions used in this study can be found in the Appendix. The answers were analyzed with emergent coding to identify recurring categories, themes, and thoughts connected to each question. After coding, similar categories were quantified in an Excel table. Some insightful and elaborate comments provided by the participants are used as examples in the presentation of the qualitative analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Positive or negative feedback on pronunciation

Participants were asked if they had ever received a positive or negative comment on their pronunciation and if so, to elaborate on any of the two. Of the 125 answers that could be processed here, 114 (91%) indicated receiving some kind of feedback on their pronunciation, whereas 11 (9%) received none. Of the 114 participants who did, 69 (60%) claimed to have received positive feedback, 26 (23%) negative feedback, and 19 claimed to have received both positive and negative feedback (17%).

Participants who received positive feedback reported on the source and the content. As far as the source is concerned, 26% indicated that positive feedback came from teachers, from other people (not specified who) (17%), native speakers (9%), foreigners (but non-native speakers) (8%), friends (5%), classmates and family members (1% each). Regarding the content of the feedback, the following categories emerged: clear and understandable pronunciation (either after a presentation [5%] or in general [9%]), good intonation (3%), improvement in pronunciation (3%), native-like accent (3%), being mistaken for a native speaker (2%), foreigners not realizing the speaker was Hungarian (2%), praise for pronunciation of certain words (2%), no detected foreign accent (1%), getting a maximum score at an oral exam (1%), and being made to read because the teacher liked the accent so much (1%). In 6% of the cases, it was merely indicated that they had received positive feedback but never specified what it was. In two cases, participants indicated that a non-native speaker had told them they had a *cute* or *lovely* accent. In evaluating these comments, participants could not decide whether they considered this a compliment or a negative comment. One of the two participants indicated that this comment motivated them.

Of the 26 cases where negative feedback was reported, 58% mentioned a teacher as a source. Further negative feedback came from other people such as classmates (in the form of laughing at incorrect pronunciation), friends, or sometimes from strangers (48%) in a context where there was interaction with them for some reason (class, visit abroad, etc.). Regarding the form of feedback, the most frequent negative feedback was considered correction when the teacher corrected the pronunciation (46%). Some participants pointed out that although the teacher corrected them, they did not consider it a negative thing, but the majority viewed correction negatively. In 8% of the cases, participants mentioned harsh criticism from their high school teachers, and there was one example when a university instructor said that the pronunciation should be “softened” (4%). Even harsher negative feedback came in the form of laughter from classmates at incorrect pronunciation (8%). The typical content of the feedback was that the pronunciation sounds Hungarian (31%), it is not good enough, and practice is required (15%), the student is difficult to understand (12%), there is a problem with intonation (8%), there is a problem with a specific sound (8%), an accent that bothers other people or that they find strange (native and Hungarian feedback) (20%), mixing of accents (4%). In 8% of the cases, receiving negative comments was mentioned, but it was not specified what they were.

#### *4.2 Improvement of pronunciation*

Participants were asked whether they had done anything consciously in the past to improve their pronunciation: 27% said they had not done anything in particular; the other 73% gave specific examples.

Of the 73% who gave specific examples, the more passive side of pronunciation development came in the form of consuming English-language media (movies, TV shows, YouTube videos, Ted Talks) (26%), listening to podcasts and music (12%), or listening to class audio files multiple times (2%). More active, although not entirely pronunciation-focused, activities include speaking with native speakers (5%), foreigners (3%), or friends (2%). A more active use of media is when the participants reported pausing and re-watching parts of films or videos and trying to repeat what the speaker said (13%) or when they imitate whole monologues or lines from comedy routines, TV shows, movies, or musicals (7%).

Other reported ways of improving pronunciation include searching for the phonetic transcription and audio pronunciation of words in the dictionary, then listening to them and practicing them (16%), repeating new words aloud until the pronunciation is close to the original (11%), singing (6%), recording oneself and listening to it (6%), speaking to oneself in English (6%), watching videos dedicated to improving pronunciation (6%), imitating or repeating things after native speakers (6%), reading aloud (5%), doing repetition exercises from coursebooks (4%), memorizing conversations, poems, and texts (2%), shadowing everyday conversations or movies (2%), studying aloud (1%), learning tongue-twisters (1%), focusing on vowels and consonants problematic for speakers of Hungarian (1%), and attending classes related to pronunciation (1%).

Some students, although having mentioned that they do not focus on pronunciation, made some additional remarks: one of them said that they pay attention to corrections coming from other people; another said that they used to work on pronunciation at school but then stopped taking the time to continue practicing alone. One participant expressed surprise that pronunciation development had not been part of any of their previous classes in school; another pointed out that having been complimented on their pronunciation, they did not think it was necessary to be too concerned about pronunciation. Finally, a participant said they did not believe focusing on pronunciation would have changed anything for them.

#### *4.3 Views on native-like accent*

The first question aimed to determine whether participants thought it possible for a language learner to attain native-like pronunciation if they learned English as a foreign language. 85% of the participants said they believed it was possible, and only 15% thought it was not. The reasons for believing it was not possible were the following: age, meaning after a certain age, it is simply not possible to sound native-like (25%); the effect of L1, which will always be there (17%); the difference between languages which hinders the acquisition of some sounds that are non-existent in the native language (8%); and one participant thought that it is only possible if you are bilingual, otherwise not (8%). Three participants (25%) gave no reason.

Those who expressed the belief that it was possible to attain native-like pronunciation can be put in two groups, those who merely stated that it was possible without any further comment (19%) and those who expressed some conditions to it (81%). Among those who said that it was

possible but mentioned no conditions, one participant gave an example of their grandmother, who, as a German teacher, was mistaken for a native by native Germans. Two other participants mentioned having friends who speak with what they called a “native-like” accent (3%). The conditions which were considered to be necessary are as follows (sometimes a student mentioned more than one possibility): abundant practice (49%), living or spending time among native speakers (19%), listening to native speakers (9%), dedicating enough time to it (7%), having musical pitch (4%), learning the language in childhood (4%).

#### *4.4 Self-evaluation of pronunciation*

Participants in the 2021 and 2022 groups (n=82) were asked whether they thought they had good pronunciation. In an earlier study, which administered this same questionnaire but focused on different questions (Baranyi-Dupák, 2022), participants did not list pronunciation when asked about the problematic aspects of English L2 speech, and less than half of the participants expressed any need to work on it. However, after listening to their own recorded speech sample, more than half of the participants reacted negatively to aspects of their pronunciation, intonation, and accent. In the revised version of the questionnaire, students were directly asked whether they thought their pronunciation was good to elicit their general opinion on the matter without them having to listen to their speech. Eighty-two participants answered this question, and 43% were satisfied with their pronunciation. However, 40% of this group named an aspect of pronunciation that they still had problems with, so only 26% of the participants were completely satisfied without any additional concerns. The ratio of those dissatisfied with their pronunciation was 18%, whereas 39% thought it was sometimes better, sometimes worse. In each case, participants were asked to justify their opinion, which showed that the decision was unclear to most participants. They provided many reasons, exceptions, and goals to support their answer, summarized below.

If participants were satisfied with their pronunciation (n=35), the majority of the answers gave positive feedback as a reason: a teacher, a fellow student, or a native speaker told them that they had good pronunciation (20%). One student, in particular, mentioned that they thought they had good pronunciation because the teacher never said that they should improve it. Another reason was that the participants felt they could perfectly pronounce most of the words and did not have problems with them, as well as the fact that they thought other people had no difficulty understanding them (13% each). Native speakers were also a re-occurring reference point for some participants: they claimed to sound close to how a native speaker sounds (9%) or said the reason for their good pronunciation was that while learning the language, they often listened to native speakers (9%). Two students claimed that speaking helped them in some way (4%) – either speaking in class or talking to native speakers. The last group of students (9%) used a Hungarian accent as a reference point against which they could define why they thought their pronunciation was good: not sounding Hungarian or not having a Hungarian accent and sounding better than the average Hungarian speaker.

Those who did not answer with a yes or no (n=32) also explained the reasons. Among these, 38% of the participants considered their general pronunciation good, even though there were still many words they could not pronounce. Two other popular reasons were that although the pronunciation was considered good, there was still room for general improvement and the improvement of intonation (19% each). An additional area to be improved was stress (14%).

Other reasons include the pronunciation not being native-like (14%), pronunciation problems when speaking fast (10%), problems when tiredness occurs, anxiety in front of native speakers or other people, and problems with specific sound combinations, such as the word-final /-sts/ sequence (5% each)

The participants who claimed not to be satisfied with their pronunciation (n=15) gave their reasons, too. For five students (33%), the main reason for their dissatisfaction was that they had a Hungarian accent. Some students were not satisfied with their intonation (27%), then came reasons such as wanting to sound more native-like, lack of confidence, problems with focusing on pronunciation while speaking, and problems with stress (13% each). In addition, some particular problems were mentioned, such as not speaking English too much or wanting to improve a specific sound (7% each).

#### *4.5 Ways of learning pronunciation in school*

This question was a new addition to the last (2022) version of the questionnaires; hence only 44 of the 128 participants answered it. Students were asked to write about ways their teachers, either in elementary school, high school, or university, dedicated in-class time to improving pronunciation. Of the participants, 70% (n=31) were able to mention an example of a pronunciation-related activity, with the other 30% not having any recollection of pronunciation practice in class or outright claiming that there was no particular focus on pronunciation in English classes.

Based on those participants' answers who reported having dealt with pronunciation in the classroom, repetition was the most popular technique used by teachers (65%). This included the repetition of sentences, words (particularly new ones), parts of the listening material, or the repetition of the mistake of a particular student by the whole class. Apart from repetition, several participants mentioned that the teacher corrected them during speaking (23%) or when they read aloud and mispronounced a word (6%). Only a handful of students reported doing the pronunciation exercises in the coursebook they used or being taught the IPA (10% in each case). Some students brought up a shadowing task done in the class the research took place (13%), two participants mentioned stress practice (6%), and one participant reported intonation practice, imitating rhythm, and marking pauses (3% each). Finally, one student reported having received positive feedback on good pronunciation (3%).

## **5. Discussion**

### *5.1 Positive or negative feedback on pronunciation*

One of the solutions that Macdonald (2002) mentions in his article for current pronunciation issues in teaching is monitoring speech and giving feedback on pronunciation. It gives reason for optimism that in the present study, teachers were the leading source of positive feedback regarding pronunciation. However, considering the total number of participants (n=128), the percentage of those whose pronunciation has been praised by a teacher is still small (18%), meaning that not even a quarter of all the participants recall having received any kind of positive feedback on their pronunciation from their teachers. It seems to be the case that teachers mostly

or only praise students if the pronunciation is good overall, even though there would be several opportunities to provide feedback regarding the improved pronunciation of a sound, a type of intonation, stress patterns, words, and so on. Naturally, it may be the case that the participants did not recall having been praised when they, in fact, were. Still, when participants received very positive or negative feedback, they tended to describe it in great detail, which could indicate that if they did not remember, they likely did not receive memorable positive feedback, which would be both surprising and problematic. In their review of 25 years of research on oral and written corrective feedback, Li and Vuono (2019) conclude that “[oral] CF has significant effects on L2 learning, with the magnitude of the effects ranging from medium to large” (p. 97), which means that systematic feedback must be an integral part of the teaching process. When it is, however, it seems that it is more focused on grammar. In his meta-analysis, Brown (2016) pointed out that only 22% of corrective feedback is aimed at pronunciation errors as opposed to 43% of grammar. Therefore, teachers must dedicate more attention to feedback on pronunciation whenever possible.

Another interesting point is that quite a few students mentioned being praised for their pronunciation after a presentation. When a student has to present something, it is a rare occasion when they have an extended period at their disposal to speak. Often it is only on these occasions that the teacher hears the student’s pronunciation, possible mistakes, and where there is room for improvement, which is why leaving room for class presentations, in addition to all the other benefits of letting students do presentations in general, should be considered.

Pronunciation is a sensitive issue, and feedback on it can be highly subjective, sometimes scarring the student for life. That is why it is important to establish a positive atmosphere in the classroom where positive feedback and good examples regarding pronunciation are encouraged – it seems that participants appreciate and remember these occasions. This is clear in the example of one participant, who describes the following:

*(1) One particular example that I can recall is when at the beginning of my academic studies, one of my teachers complimented my pronunciation and how I sounded and made me read a whole slide full of information aloud because she liked a lot how I sounded. She also told me that I should become a voice actor.*

This certainly felt like a motivating experience for the student. Of course, it is questionable whether every student would have enjoyed being under the spotlight in this fashion. However, if the teacher knows that the student feels comfortable doing this, it certainly gives them incentive and motivation to continue improving their pronunciation.

The leading sources of negative feedback were, once again, teachers. However, it needs to be clarified that there is no consensus among participants on whether corrective feedback counts as negative feedback. A few students indicated that although their teacher had occasionally corrected them, they did not mind and thought it was helpful. However, other students worded their answers in a way that made it clear they considered correction negative feedback. As mentioned above, pronunciation is a sensitive aspect of language learning, and teachers should be cautious when giving feedback. On the other hand, it is also the responsibility of teachers to make the student understand that if their pronunciation is corrected, it is not necessarily intended as criticism (if it is done appropriately). There are two examples of how extremely negative feedback affected the participants:

*(2) I received a lot of negative comments on my English and my knowledge, and trying was never enough. I was constantly corrected during my oral presentations and made to repeat the phrases and words correctly. The most specific and most “memorable” negative comment I got was when my teacher advised me to listen to English songs (...) because my pronunciation is terrible (this is the exact words she used). This happened in 12th grade before the school leaving exam. I felt extremely demotivated and sad. By that time, I had given in [submitted] my application for university (...).*

*(3) One of my English teachers said I not only have the worst grammar she had seen in her life, but my pronunciation is just not English and that I’ll never be able to learn any language. It was when I was 14.*

Both are examples of harsh criticism that not only failed to guide students in improving their pronunciation but seems to have crushed their confidence as well, or at least became a memory that remains with these participants to this very day. Both teachers’ attitude gives the impression that they felt they did not have a role in improving the students’ pronunciation and that it was something that students should manage on their own. Today, plenty of materials are available in any of the target languages students learn, particularly English, and it is easy to come to the above conclusion. However, every student is different in how much they are willing or capable of picking up pronunciation patterns from the media they consume. Teachers are responsible for providing help and guidance in achieving the pronunciation goals they set for themselves (the literature is increasingly focused on providing the material that facilitates this; see, for example, Murphy, 2017; McGregor & Reed, 2018; or Jarosz, 2019). Another illustration of not entirely effective feedback is the comment where the teacher did give constructive feedback, but in a way that was not understandable for the student: “a university instructor said that my pronunciation should be softened.” The idea that pronunciation needs to be “softened” is too vague and subjective for a student to understand, so more explicit guidance is necessary. Naturally, pronunciation improvement involves plenty of individual work, but the classroom is an excellent place to start. In this regard, exercises that avoid singling students out and include plenty of joint practice can provide more comfort. Individual utterances can then follow if the group feels comfortable.

In terms of the content of the reported feedback, there is a varying degree of objectivity. Feedback indicating incomprehensibility due to problematic pronunciation or intonation or a mispronounced sound is clear, understandable, and can be utilized. To help students understand and improve challenging aspects of pronunciation, Fraser (2001) says that learners should not necessarily imitate native speakers’ production but suggests the application of *critical listening*, which “involves learners’ listening to learners’ pronunciation, as opposed to that of native speakers, and learning to judge whether the pronunciation is ‘acceptable’ (by whatever standards are appropriate in that particular class) or not” (p. 55). She adds that it would be a good idea for learners to “listen to recordings of their own voices, and especially if they can be recorded saying similar things several times, and then listen back to see if they can pick the versions that are correct or incorrect” (p.55), which indicates that comparing them to themselves could be more realistic than comparing them to a native standard. However, comments which say that the accent sounds Hungarian, that it bothers people, that it is a mixture of accents, or that pronunciation is not good and requires work are not only vague and subjective but also suggest that there is a perfect version of which students fall short. Pronunciation problems that

affect intelligibility and comprehensibility certainly need to be worked on, but when it comes to accent and pronunciation, words like *too*, *not enough*, and *bothering* should be avoided. Teachers can and should carefully consider how they convey this information to students. Of course, what other English or native speakers say to students cannot be controlled because they have their views and (mis)conceptions about language learning and accents. Students, however, can be taught that there are Englishes spoken in the world and that even if their pronunciation or accent is commented on, they should be able to decide how much of it is constructive criticism and how much is a subjective opinion. This can prevent future negative feelings and insecurity.

### 5.2 Improvement of pronunciation

Remarkably, as much as 73% of the participants mentioned having done something consciously to improve their pronunciation. However, one interesting data point that stands out is that 26% (n=24) considered listening to English language media as a way of developing pronunciation. Immersion has been proven to develop stress timing in naturalistic learning (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006). In such a situation, learners may observe and notice pronunciation phenomena that they could integrate into their speech later. However, the necessary interaction that could contribute to such gains is missing in a FL learning situation. Students might feel like listening is the next best option in terms of “surrounding” themselves by the L2. Although some participants wrote about more ways of developing pronunciation than just watching movies, this was the only answer given by many. Some participants believed that listening to plenty of English language material and talking to native speakers contributed to or even shaped their current pronunciation. One participant pointed out that when they want to watch a show or a video for study purposes, they listen more consciously than when they watch them for fun. Compared to the previous decades, the volume of material available for streaming and listening has skyrocketed, which makes regular listening to English easy and accessible and could provide today’s students with a confidence that previous generations might lack. However, the fact that despite the availability of this much material, some learners still claim to be dissatisfied with their accent or strive for a native-like one suggests that listening to songs, watching movies, or TV shows may not be the best solution for improving pronunciation for everyone.

As for the participants who claimed not to be working on their pronunciation in any way, three comments are worth special attention. One of the students pointed out that they found it strange that there was no course in their university program dedicated to pronunciation development (and several added that shadowing done in class was the first exercise in their lives that they considered active development of pronunciation). As mentioned above, at the university where the author of the present study teaches, teacher trainees receive their first formal training in phonetics and phonology in their fourth year. Naturally, the topic may appear as part of different courses, but systematically, as research suggests, it is not necessarily addressed in university programs. However, first addressing pronunciation issues this late into their language learning experience indicates that pronunciation teaching is indeed missing in some schools. The other two seemingly opposing comments are also worth noting: one participant said that as they had never had problems with pronunciation, it did not seem necessary to focus on it. The other believed that working on pronunciation would not have changed anything for them. Saito (2021) points out that even though instruction might not improve accentedness, a balanced focus on different aspects of L2 could contribute to the

improvement of the comprehensibility of speech. Therefore, working on pronunciation is still worth the effort, even for the less optimistic, as there are gains that might not be immediately obvious or present themselves in an aspect of their L2 they would not have thought of. Although these are just two examples, they represent two opinions that might be much more common than they seem. Research shows that some individual differences, such as motivation and effort (Moyer, 2007; Nagle, 2018), musical aptitude (Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Milovanov et al., 2010), or a higher working memory capacity (Darcy et al., 2015) may help some students achieve outstanding results. Students who are gifted with the ability to quickly and effortlessly improve their pronunciation rarely experience it as a struggle. However, not having experienced the specific focal points of pronunciation development, when these students become teachers, they might underestimate its difficulty for other people or may be unable to advise their future students.

### *5.3 Views on native-like accent*

Participants were asked to express their views on whether they thought it possible to achieve a native-like accent. Students who believed it was impossible to have a native-like accent seem to echo the views and reasons described by previous research. However, optimistic people feel that even a native-like accent is possible if one works hard enough. Interestingly, most (85%) of the participants did believe it was possible to achieve a native-like accent, and more than half of this 85% emphasized the importance of conscious practice and socializing with native speakers. This is in line with Cenoz & Lecumberri's (1999) findings, who reported that students consider contact with native speakers important in acquiring pronunciation. Although motivation has been shown to affect L2 foreign accent to at least some extent (Suter, 1976; Flege et al., 1995), there is no automatic connection between the two (Piske et al., 2001), meaning that determination and drive to sound as native-like as possible or the desire to imitate a particular accent and work very hard on it does not mean that they actually will be able to achieve this goal (however, positive attitude combined with other factors could bring results, cf. Moyer, 2007). The remaining participants imagined a less active approach to achieving a native-like accent, that is, listening to native input or living among native speakers. The latter could naturally involve seeking out opportunities to socialize with them, but this was not necessarily clarified. However, these two views might indicate that the desired pronunciation automatically happens if the necessary input and context are available. In a study on learners' views of social issues in pronunciation learning in the US, Levis (2015) reports a similar belief among students who already live in an L2 setting, namely, that "they could 'catch' (like a cold) good pronunciation from input alone" and "they were afraid that they could also 'catch' the defective pronunciation of a NNS teacher" (p. 52). As he points out, this reflects the belief that models are more important than effective teaching. This belief also emerged in the present study, which is especially clear from how none of the participants thought a qualified teacher could help them achieve their goal of having (close to) native-like pronunciation. Musical ability and training, a condition mentioned by a handful of participants, have been reported to affect how L2 speech is perceived and produced (Arellano & Draper, 1972; Slevc & Miyake, 2006).

It gives reason for optimism that students feel like achieving their desired goals is an option. Still, even those students who initially seem optimistic think that it can only happen under particular circumstances and that they are left to their own devices in achieving their

goals. This belief could prevent them from feeling responsible for aiding their future students in attaining their potential goals of sounding native-like, despite research having emphasized experienced teachers' important role in achieving positive pronunciation changes (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Thus, apart from knowing that the proper context, social situations, and agency in social settings contribute a great deal to a possibly desired native-like accent, future teachers of English need to see what additional tools they have if the conditions are not exactly right.

#### 5.4 Self-evaluation of pronunciation

Less than half of the participants considered their pronunciation to be good. In deciding, most of them relied on someone whose opinion they valued, such as a teacher, a friend, or a native speaker. It is interesting, however, that some students believed their pronunciation was good because nobody claimed the opposite. Although self-assessment is a pedagogical tool used and viewed positively in assessment among teachers (Noonan & Duncan, 2005), learners might find the process difficult (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2008). In addition, anxiety also affects the self-assessment process (MacIntyre et al., 1997; Szyszka, 2011), leading students to under- or overestimate themselves. Also, there are discrepancies between objective measures and self-assessment performances (Dlaska & Krekeler, 2008; Trofimovich et al., 2016) and between a general and a task-focused self-assessment (Baranyi-Dupák, 2022), which urges teachers to use this tool cautiously in their teaching process. Regular feedback on pronunciation, even if it is generally good and the student is comprehensible, helps students see their performance more clearly.

Another criterion which helped students judge their pronunciation favorably was that they thought they pronounced most of the sounds and used intonation as native speakers do or because they learned via listening to native speakers. Thus, native speakers proved to be a reference point for these students. Of the 8 participants who claimed this, 6 gave a specific example of feedback in an earlier question which supports that their self-evaluation is based on external opinions.

Some participants either seemed optimistic about their pronunciation but admitted to some weaknesses and difficulties or belonged to the category who sounded undecided about the quality of their pronunciation. It is interesting to look at what the reasons were for the lack of complete satisfaction: upon encountering new words, there might be qualms about the correct pronunciation; specific areas such as intonation, accent, and stress placement were considered problematic; and having generally good pronunciation, but pointing out that there is always something to be worked on. Some students acknowledged that their pronunciation performance might be influenced by anxiety or nervousness (cf. Szyszka, 2011; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002), their state of mind, tiredness (cf. Mercer, 2012), or even whether they have to speak faster than usual or utter specific sounds or sound combinations. The most problematic sounds mentioned were the dental fricatives [ð] and [θ], which are missing from Hungarian. In their study, Bloem et al. (2016) indeed point out, based on their data, that Hungarian speakers tend to replace [ð] with [d] in the words these and the.

The biggest reasons for dissatisfaction were a Hungarian accent, intonation problems, not sounding native-like, lack of confidence, inability to focus on pronunciation during speech, and stress. The mentioned categories are not surprising because acquiring English stress patterns tends to be difficult for Hungarians, as “Hungarian *lexical words* (i.e., non-function words),

whether simple (...) or derived (...), have a single primary stress, which falls on the first syllable of the word, and they have no secondary stresses” (Varga, 2002, p. 130).

The positive feeling associated with not sounding Hungarian, “getting away with” the accent, and not giving one’s L1 away frequently resurfaced among the answers. Feyér (2012) reported that Hungarian participants favored native-speaker pronunciation and reacted negatively or even ridiculed non-native and Hungarian English. In addition, Püski (2022) reported that those university students who perceived their Hungarian accent as strong had a stronger desire to sound native-like, and the participants of the study often found non-native-like speech problematic. She also found that participants were not satisfied with their own pronunciation. Although this particular aspect is not the focus of the present study, in another question of the questionnaire, 67% of the participants expressed the desire to sound native-like which supports the findings mentioned above and explains why any trace of Hungarian in their speech is rejected.

### *5. 5 Ways of learning pronunciation in school*

In the new question of the 2022 questionnaire, which aimed to glean more information on whether pronunciation learning took place during the participant’s primary and secondary education, and if yes, how, 70% of the 44 participants recalled having learned pronunciation in the classroom during their studies. Regarding the type of exercises, more than half of them (65%) mentioned repetition. Students did not always specify what they were required to repeat, but words and sentences were separately mentioned in about 50% of the cases. This supports previous results saying that teachers prefer phoneme- and word-level repetition (Baker, 2014; Buss, 2016; Foote et al., 2016.) Such decontextualized drills, as Sardegna and McGregor (2022) point out, allow “learners to make changes to their pronunciation with the help of pronunciation learning strategies, repetition and speech models at their own pace and in a safe environment” (p.118). However, they go on to point out that the next step should be contextualized practice because, ultimately, it is these types of tasks that enable skill transfer into spontaneous speech. Signs of contextualized practice came from the answers of the seven participants who mentioned having been corrected during speaking (although not specified when or how). It is important to remember, of course, that students may not recall occasions when other types of pronunciation-focused activities took place. However, the popularity of repetition tasks in this dataset points to the need to clarify the role and function of these exercises and introduce other possibilities for teachers to focus on.

About a quarter of the students mentioned examples of what could be identified as explicit instruction or perceptual training, such as teaching IPA symbols, intonation, stress, rhythm, and pauses or doing pronunciation exercises related to them. One participant, in particular, recalled the learning of IPA symbols like this:

*(4) “The most boring way possible. They tried to show us the symbols of phonemes with drawings behind them. ... I don’t recall more information because I tend to forget boring things.”*

According to the research done in seven European countries by Henderson et al. (2015), 82% of the English teachers in their study taught symbol recognition to their students, and 40% focused on symbol writing. Of course, this one comment does not necessarily mean that every student

would find this activity boring. However, it does point out that students need to see the point of learning these symbols and how it could contribute to their perception and, ultimately, better production of the sounds of the target language.

The answers given by participants seem to show teachers' preference for textbook materials, as only one participant mentioned that their teacher used a news channel to improve their pronunciation. In Henderson et al.'s (2015) study mentioned above, there was a clear preference for language-learning websites and YouTube among teachers, none of which was used by the teachers of the participants of the present study. As textbooks might not be the most appropriate for the context or specific problems, teachers should be encouraged to find interactive and innovative material which goes beyond simple repetition to engage students and make pronunciation learning more memorable. Other answers revealed that students find ways of honing their pronunciation skills through online materials regardless. However, it would be necessary for teachers to assist them in this activity or make it more conscious by recommending websites and content that is useful and appropriate for their learning goals.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study aimed to gain insight into pronunciation-related views, beliefs, and attitudes of Hungarian teacher trainees as well as their pronunciation learning past and self-evaluation regarding pronunciation. The results indicate that students are very optimistic about the attainability of a native-like accent, that only a little more than half of the participants ever received positive feedback on their pronunciation, and that students feel that they are actively working on improving their pronunciation, with which less than half of them are satisfied. A smaller group of students reported having worked on pronunciation with their teacher in school, but the main form of pronunciation improvement was repetition or learning from the teacher's corrections of pronunciation mistakes.

The results of the present study on participants' past and current pronunciation learning habits and experiences underline the necessity of improved pronunciation teaching methods and strategies in school, as well as more nuanced and frequent feedback from teachers. Students have reported using plenty of techniques to work on their pronunciation individually. However, individual work and classroom work should intertwine regarding pronunciation teaching, during which the teacher focuses on and assesses students' pronunciation, gives feedback on it as well as provides opportunities for further practice both in the classroom and in the form of recommendations for individual work. This could also increase students' satisfaction with their pronunciation, which was present only in less than half of the participants in the present study. Despite this, teacher trainees believe in the possibility of attaining a native-like accent, feeling that hard work brings results. Even though research says there are boundaries to what one can achieve in terms of native-like accent, the willingness to work on pronunciation and accent and the belief that it is fruitful is undoubtedly a prerequisite for implementing this type of work into their teaching practices later. However, the terminology and expressions in students' answers also necessitate clarification of pronunciation goals and pronunciation-related concepts early on in teacher training.

Results also showed that repetition is the leading form of pronunciation improvement. Although it certainly has its functions, the amount of online material available today calls for updated and revised ways of teaching pronunciation, which could incorporate repetition (and

other techniques) into classroom work in a more exciting and, most importantly, context-appropriate way. It is also the responsibility of teacher training to show future teachers helpful, challenging, and engaging ways of pronunciation teaching, which target the problematic aspects of pronunciation in their L1 and not just in general. As long as future teachers must rely on themselves in pronunciation improvement, they might have creative and novel ideas, but they will not necessarily appear in education systematically. Only by making teachers and, consequently, learners of English aware of pronunciation difficulties and possible strategies are we likely to reach a point where Hungarian learners develop a healthy attitude towards their speech, accent, and pronunciation. In this way, they can keep pushing their boundaries but, hopefully, learn to feel comfortable with what they have achieved.

### Appendix: Open-ended questions used in the study

1. Have you ever received a positive or negative comment on your pronunciation?  
If yes, what was it?
2. Have you done/do you do anything to consciously improve your pronunciation (in school or on your own)? If yes, what?
3. Do you think it is possible for a language learner to attain a native-like accent (if they learn English as a foreign language)?
4. Would you say your English pronunciation is good? If yes, why do you think so? If not, why? What would you like to improve?
5. If your teachers (elementary, high school, or university) have dedicated time to pronunciation in English class, please explain how.

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