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An investigation of Austrian upper-secondary students'
attitudes towards the American and British English accents and
their pronunciation patterns

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Abstract

Austrian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners today face heightened exposure to Extramural English (EE), particularly American English, through digital media. Consequently, their pronunciation goals and pronunciation realisation may no longer align with traditional instructional models, which are still predominantly British English-oriented in Austria. While some scholars have explored such interrelations in other contexts, the Austrian setting remains rather neglected when it comes to the investigation of students' attitudes towards accent models, their EE exposure and actual pronunciation patterns. To bridge this gap, this thesis investigates how Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners perceive and evaluate two major accent models, namely Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA), and how their preferences as well as their EE exposure correspond to their production of the segmental features rhotic /r/ and intervocalic /t/ flapping. Using a mixed-method design, data are collected from 30 learners from two upper-secondary classes at an Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule (AHS) in Vienna via a questionnaire on accent attitudes, pronunciation goals, and EE exposure, and through a recorded reading task which is analysed for the two features. Questionnaire results indicate a clear tendency towards GA in learners' preferences as well as a continued attachment to native-like accents as an appropriate pronunciation goal, however intelligibility is also rated highly. EE exposure is predominantly passive and American-oriented among the participants. Auditory phonetic analysis of the reading-aloud task shows variable feature use, with GA-consistent patterns occurring more frequently overall. Comparisons between self-reported accent orientation and actual production reveal general alignment, yet several notable mismatches emerge, underscoring the disconnect between self-perception and phonetic behaviour. Taken together, these findings suggest that pronunciation teaching in Austria may benefit from broader model inclusion, increased emphasis on intelligibility and more explicit discussion and integration of students' own pronunciation goals into the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Austrian EFL students, Pronunciation, Accent attitudes, Extramural English, Intelligibility

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List of Abbreviations

EFL.....	English as a foreign language
EE.....	Extramural English
RP.....	Received Pronunciation
GA.....	General American
L2.....	Second language
CLT.....	Communicative Language Teaching
AHS.....	Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule
ELF.....	English as a Lingua Franca
JASP.....	Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program
CEFR.....	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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1. Introduction

Since English is used widely among native as well as non-native speakers to communicate in international, professional but also other social contexts, the need to develop an intelligible pronunciation when speaking English has increased. Especially the current generation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students are affected by this development, as the need to develop an understandable pronunciation makes English not only an academic subject but also an essential skill that shapes opportunities in higher education, professional mobility, and online interaction. However, within the broader landscape of English language learning, pronunciation occupies an often underestimated position, although research has repeatedly demonstrated that pronunciation strongly affects intelligibility, comprehensibility, and listeners' social judgements (Derwing & Munro, 2022; Levis, 2018; Munro & Derwing, 2015). A speaker's pronunciation can influence not only if their message is understood, but also how listeners judge their competence as well as their confidence, and how their identity is perceived. Thus, pronunciation should play a central and crucial role in EFL teaching. Despite this centrality, pronunciation remains one of the least consistently taught (Levis, 2020, p. 312) and most variably understood components of language education. This gap continues to affect learners' language competence and instructional practices across many EFL settings.

Crucially, the instructional gap regarding pronunciation coincides with a seismic shift in how learners encounter English: the exponential rise of Extramural English (EE). European learners today, especially younger generations, are increasingly immersed in a vast, informal digital ecosystem of English-language media, often surpassing their in-class exposure in both quantity and variety (Banzina, 2025, p. 68). Critically, this extramural input is not evenly distributed across English varieties, as it is predominantly characterised by American English, driven by the global dominance of U.S.-produced film, television, music, and digital platforms (Richter & Weissenböck, 2021, p. 8). This pervasive EE environment functions as a powerful, parallel source of phonetic input, exposing students to a global spectrum of accents far beyond the traditional classroom models, which are commonly Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA) in Europe. Consequently, EE does not merely supplement formal instruction, it fundamentally reshapes learners' auditory landscapes, influences their accent

preferences, and provides implicit, incidental pronunciation practice. This reality forces a critical re-evaluation of pronunciation teaching: educators must now account for and potentially leverage the diverse input students receive outside the classroom, navigating the tension between established pedagogical norms and the lived reality of their students' English exposure.

The social meaning and identity value attached to different accents mean that learners' exposure, both inside and outside the classroom, directly informs their pronunciation goals, creating a complex landscape. In educational settings, students are often encouraged to adopt native-like accents (Levis, 2020, p. 313; Timmis, 2002, p. 243), such as RP. In contrast, the English they engage with in digital environments, for instance, is diverse and global (Sewell, 2016, p. 1), where intelligibility is prioritised over conforming to a single accent model. This tension persists despite a broad scholarly consensus that intelligibility, rather than native-like accent, should constitute the primary goal of pronunciation instruction (Levis, 2018, p. 15; Munro, 2011, p. 13; Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 303). While contemporary curricula increasingly frame pronunciation within communicative competence and international intelligibility, the native speaker norm remains a deeply embedded reference point, both in many classroom practices and learners' implicit aspirations. Such contradictions create uncertainty for students about what pronunciation targets are desirable, realistic, or even necessary.

A growing body of research has investigated native-speaker models, students' attitudes towards accents, learners' pronunciation patterns and their exposure to English outside the classroom focusing primarily on tertiary-level and upper-secondary learners from Sweden (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024), Armenia and Germany (Seyranyan & Westphal, 2021), Indonesia (Adityo & Novitasari, 2023), Asia (Algharabali & Taqi, 2018; Scales et al., 2006), Canada (Foote et al., 2016), Belgium (Roberts, 2020) and China (Sung, 2016). While Dalton-Puffer et al.'s (1997) foundational research focused on learner attitudes towards accent models in Austria and Schurz and Sundqvist's (2022) cross-national survey included upper-secondary teachers' perspectives on EE in the country, comparable research focusing on the quantity and nature of EE input, learner attitudes towards accent models in the age of global digital media, and the analysis of learners' actual production has not been conducted within the Austrian context. This unexplored area is of particular relevance in Austria, as the widening gap between traditional instructional input and the diversity

of authentic EE input presents a central challenge for contemporary language pedagogy and acquisition research.

This blind spot in the literature is the basis for the present research. The overarching problem this study addresses is the lack of empirical insight into how young Austrian learners perceive English accents and produce English pronunciation in an environment where school-based models and EE exposure appear to pull in different directions. Without such insights, educators lack the knowledge needed to design pronunciation instruction that is both pedagogically consistent and responsive to learners' realities. The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to examine how Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners perceive and evaluate English accents, how they orient themselves toward RP and GA as accent models, and how these attitudes relate to their actual production of selected segmental features and their patterns of exposure to English outside school. To achieve this aim, the study integrates two complementary data sources: (1) a questionnaire capturing students' accent preferences, attitudes, and EE exposure, and (2) a reading task analysed for two diagnostic features, namely rhotic /r/ and flapping, known to distinguish RP and GA. Together, these components enable a multifaceted exploration of the relationship between perception, preference, exposure, and pronunciation. The scope of this study is intentionally limited to two accent models and two segmental features. While pronunciation is a multidimensional construct involving suprasegmentals, fluency, and broader sociophonetic patterns, these delimitations allow for a focused, systematic analysis feasible within the scope of a Masters' thesis. The findings are not intended to generalise to all Austrian learners, but rather to provide an exploratory study that can inform future research and pedagogical reflection.

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. To establish a foundation for the study, the key terminology, including pronunciation, accent, intelligibility, models, norms, and EE, is defined in the second section. The literature is then reviewed in the next chapter, which traces the role of pronunciation in EFL teaching, the historical dominance and subsequent re-evaluation of native speaker norms, the status of RP and GA, learner attitudes towards accents, and the growing influence of EE. Following this, the methodology is outlined in the fourth section, which presents the research questions alongside the design, participants, instruments, and analytical procedures. The results are detailed in chapter five, reporting on both the questionnaire findings and the phonetic analysis. The findings are discussed in the subsequent section in relation to

the existing literature, where pedagogical implications are articulated, limitations are addressed, and directions for future research are offered. Finally, the last chapter concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings and providing final reflections.

2. Key terminology

In order to provide conceptual clarity and establish a shared understanding of the central concepts used throughout this thesis, the following section defines the key terms relevant to the study. Since this research investigates students' attitudes towards English accent models and their pronunciation performance in relation to RP, GA, and EE, it is essential to first delineate how these concepts are understood and applied within the present context. The terms pronunciation, accent, intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness, as well as model, norm and EE, are discussed in the following subsection.

2.1 Pronunciation and accent: production

Pronunciation constitutes a multifaceted and integral component of EFL teaching. However, its very complexity, encompassing segmental and suprasegmental features as well as the social and regional variation captured by accent, makes it a challenging concept to define succinctly, as a single definition often fails to capture its full scope. It is for this reason that the present thesis adopts a focused, operational understanding of pronunciation, which will be explained in the following section.

Firstly, it is essential to distinguish between pronunciation and accent, as both are examined in this research but represent different aspects of speech. On the one hand, accent can be defined as different ways of speaking a particular language (Hazen, 2017, p. 189). Every speaker therefore naturally has an accent, as speech is always shaped by social, geographical, and linguistic influences. Consequently, no accent can be considered inherently superior to another, as all accents represent legitimate and systematic varieties of a language (Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 476). On the other hand, pronunciation refers to the concrete realization of speech sounds and patterns, which can be consciously modified through learning and instruction (Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 480). Therefore, in this study, the term *accent* is used to denote the reference models under investigation, namely RP and GA, while *pronunciation* describes the learners' actual spoken performance in relation to these models.

Beyond this terminological distinction, it is essential to recognise that pronunciation itself is a multidimensional construct. Pronunciation must first be understood as distinct from the related fields of phonology and phonetics (Derwing, 2012, p. 2). Phonology is concerned with the abstract sound system of language, namely how sounds function and pattern at a cognitive level, whereas phonetics focuses on the physical production and acoustic properties of speech sounds. Pronunciation, by contrast, represents the applied dimension of this knowledge, where phonological and phonetic understanding is realised in actual language use (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 39). Further, pronunciation is inherently dualistic (Derwing, 2012, p. 2), encompassing both perception of speech sounds, namely the ability to accurately hear and decode the acoustic signals of others, and the production of those sounds through the coordinated use of the articulatory organs. Finally, pronunciation includes both segmental features, such as individual vowels and consonants, as well as suprasegmental features, including stress, rhythm, and intonation. Mastery of pronunciation, thus, involves not only articulatory accuracy but also the ability to employ prosodic features appropriately within social and linguistic contexts.

More specifically, segmental features are individual sound segments, often called phonemes, which are the smallest units of sound that can change the meaning of a word (Rogerson-Revell, 2017, p. 93). For example, the difference between ship /ɪ/ and sheep /i:/ illustrates how change in a vowel phoneme alters meaning, while fan /f/ and van /v/ reveal how a difference in consonant phoneme can distinguish one word from the other. As demonstrated by this example, segmentals can be further categorized into consonants and vowels. Consonantal features are defined by the way airflow is constricted or blocked in the vocal tract through place, manner and voicing (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 42), while vowel features are determined by tongue height as well as position and lip rounding (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 45). Together these features form the phonemic inventory of a language. However, such sound segments not only carry meaning distinctions within a language but also account for variation across accents (Rogerson-Revell, 2017, p. 94), as phonemes may be realised differently depending on the speaker's linguistic background or pronunciation goals. Consequently, segmental features, as opposed to suprasegmental features, are examined in the present research as the basis for analysing learners' pronunciation concerning two accent models, namely RP and GA.

To distinguish between these two accents, two specific segmental features were selected for detailed analysis: rhotic /r/ and flapping/tapping. These features represent salient and well-documented distinctions between the two target accent models. Rhoticity refers to the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/, that is the /r/ sound occurring after a vowel within a syllable. The realisation of the /r/ sound differs considerably among various English accents. While RP is typically non-rhotic, meaning that /r/ is not pronounced unless followed by a vowel, GA is rhotic, and speakers articulate /r/ in all positions (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 207). This contrast serves as one of the most distinctive phonetic markers separating British standard and American varieties of English. Selected for detailed analysis in this project, flapping (or tapping), involves the realization of intervocalic /t/ or /d/ as a voiced alveolar tap [ɾ]. This process is characteristic of North American English (Rogerson-Revell, 2017, p. 107), whereas in RP, the same sounds are typically maintained as distinct alveolar stops. Both features were selected since they provide observable evidence of accent orientation.

While pronunciation and accent describe how learners produce speech, communicative success depends on how listeners experience that speech, namely its intelligibility, comprehensibility, and perceived accentedness. These concepts are explained in the next section.

2.2 Intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness: listener-centred outcomes

In the context of pronunciation research, the constructs of accentedness, intelligibility and comprehensibility serve as central but distinct dimensions of spoken performance. It is therefore essential to define how each of these concepts is understood in the present study and how they interrelate and differ.

To begin with, accentedness refers to the degree to which a speaker's pronunciation differs from that of a perceived linguistic norm or reference accent, typically a native accent. Accentedness therefore relies on the listener's perception of the perceived strength of the speaker's foreign accent (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 291). This concept reflects the perception of foreignness and is thus considered a subjective measure influenced by social attitudes, listener experiences, and expectations. These biases may lead to negative judgements about a speaker's competence or proficiency in the spoken language (Levis, 2018, p. 17). Consequently, accent eradication has long been

a primary goal for many learners. However, foreign-accented speech is very common among language learners, and even those with advanced grammatical proficiency and strong communicative skills typically retain a noticeable accent, while still being generally understandable (Levis, 2018, p. 11). This is where intelligibility comes into play.

While accentedness primarily concerns how a speaker's accent is perceived, intelligibility shifts the focus to how successfully the speech is understood. More specifically, it refers to the extent to which a listener is able to correctly recognize or transcribe an utterance produced by a speaker (Yazan, 2015, p. 202). Intelligibility, therefore, focuses on the functional aspects of speech, highlighting the relationship between the speakers' phonological production and the listeners' ability to decode the intended message. Factors influencing intelligibility include segmental features, suprasegmental features, and overall speech rate. Moreover, accented speech can also impede effective communication and, thus, intelligibility. However, it is crucial to mention that even though accented speech may require greater processing effort from listeners, the message may still be understood (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 302). Accentedness can thus be high while intelligibility remains high as well. For example, Austrian-accented English might be easily understood by Austrian speakers of English who are accustomed to this accent, demonstrating that a strong foreign accent does not necessarily prevent successful message decoding. Therefore, intelligibility represents a crucial threshold for successful oral communication, as it determines whether the speaker's intended message can be accurately conveyed regardless of accent or linguistic variation. Improving intelligibility, instead of accent eradication, thus, seems to be a more realistic goal when it comes to pronunciation learning as well as teaching (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 15).

Building upon the concept of intelligibility, comprehensibility extends the discussion by emphasising the listener's perceived ease of understanding rather than the mere accuracy of decoding the message. The mentioned ease can be measured via listener ratings of effort (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 291), which again suggests that this concept is subjective. This implies that comprehensibility not only depends on segmental and suprasegmental accuracy but also on other factors, such as discourse organisation, vocabulary use, and familiarity with the speaker's accent. Comprehensibility plays a crucial role in communicative success, as speech that is moderately or even highly accented or slightly unintelligible can still be highly

comprehensible when supported by contextual cues and listener adaption (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 301). Ultimately, comprehensibility underscores the interactive and listener-dependent nature of spoken communication, highlighting that effective understanding in EFL contexts extends beyond perfect pronunciation towards overall communicative clarity.

As presented, accentedness, intelligibility and comprehensibility are closely interconnected. They capture different yet overlapping aspects of listener judgement (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 291). In the present study, these concepts function as analytical tools to measure whether students' actual pronunciation matches the accent models they aspire to. Accentedness plays a particularly central role, as it concerns measurable deviations from established models, specifically RP and GA, which allows for systematic analysis of how closely learners' speech aligns with or diverges from these reference accents. Intelligibility itself was not directly measured, rather the questionnaire assessed students' beliefs about whether intelligibility should be the primary goal of pronunciation learning. Thus, the concept of intelligibility can support the analysis of students' views on whether the ultimate aim of pronunciation learning should be to sound like a native speaker or simply to be understood. Lastly, comprehensibility is not a direct focus of this research, yet it remains conceptually relevant since the three constructs are interdependent and can help situate the findings within the broader discussion of pronunciation teaching. Thus, the focus on accentedness and intelligibility in the present study provides a practical framework for investigating how learners perceive and produce pronunciation in relation to model accents.

While these listener-centred constructs are useful for evaluating speech, the question of what counts as a 'target' shifts the focus to accent models and norms. This is the subject of the following chapter.

2.3 Accent models vs norms: targets and expectations

When discussing pronunciation teaching in an EFL context, two related but distinct concepts often arise: *models* and *norms*. Although they are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday language, it is important to distinguish how each term is used in the context of pronunciation research and pedagogy.

A model in pronunciation teaching is a reference variety that learners may aim to approximate more or less closely, depending on the needs of the specific situation (Jenkins, 1998, p. 124). In other words, a model is descriptive and flexible. Learners may strive to mimic it, but perfect replication is neither always feasible nor required. In contrast, a norm implies a standard or expectation of correct, idealised pronunciation, often implicitly tied to native speaker proficiency (Jenkins, 1998, p. 124). A norm further inevitably carries an evaluative weight: one accent might be perceived as more acceptable or correct than another since only one was chosen to be norm-worthy (Levis, 2020, p. 315). This distinction between model and norm is not merely terminological; rather, it reflects a fundamental tension in pronunciation pedagogy between flexibility and prescriptivism.

Pronunciation pedagogy appears to be shifting from conceptualizing native speaker varieties as prescriptive norms to positioning them as flexible models for learners. This marks a departure from the traditional “nativeness principle” (Levis, 2020, p. 314), which argues that learners should aim to match native speaker norms, with the underlying assumption that a native-like accent is both attainable and desirable. Here, typical features from chosen accents are taken as elements of pronunciation that have to be met to follow the established norm. However, following the high expectation of always adjusting one’s accent to the norm is certainly unrealistic. Therefore, this idealised pattern of attaining a perfect native accent has been challenged in recent decades (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025, p. 3; Szyszka, 2021, p. 99). The spread of English as an international language and the emergence of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) have made it impractical and unnecessary for learners to adopt native-like accents. Instead, learners often interact with other non-native speakers, where intelligibility (see chapter 2.2) across diverse accents is far more relevant than adherence to any single prestige accent model (Jenkins, 2009, p. 204). This shift reflects a broader reconceptualization of who owns English. As English has transformed into a global language, it no longer belongs exclusively to its native speakers but to all those who use it, a notion often referred to as the “ownership of English” (Widdowson, 1994; Dobrić et al., 2026, pp. 228–229). This means that a model must be achievable through professional competence rather than determined by birthright (Holliday, 2008, pp. 128–129). Crucially, such a model must also accommodate the diversity of global English users, which is precisely what the intelligibility principle offers.

This arising principle in EFL pronunciation teaching recognizes the diversity of existing accents in foreign language learning and teaching and thus does not see accentedness as a complication for successful communication (Levis, 2020, p. 313). Here, the link back to listener-centred outcomes becomes clear: models that foreground intelligibility directly shape how speech is evaluated by listeners. Unlike nativeness-oriented norms, which measure success against an idealized native speaker, intelligibility-focused models prioritize whether the message is actually understood (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 15). This distinction has important implications for how accents are positioned in the classroom. Accents can still be used as a model, but not as a norm since their purpose lies in providing a point of reference rather than a measure of correctness or success. From this perspective, pronunciation teaching shifts away from enforcing conformity to a single *ideal* accent and instead moves towards developing intelligible, comprehensible and contextually appropriate speech. For this reason, the intelligibility principle, coupled with the concept of a model accent, reflects a more realistic and communicatively oriented goal, acknowledging that effective communication does not depend on sounding like a native speaker but on being understood by a wide range of interlocutors. When teachers treat accent models as flexible references, learners are encouraged to explore and experiment with features that enhance clarity and confidence rather than feeling pressured to imitate a native accent perfectly (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025, p. 9). In contrast, when pronunciation is taught as a fixed norm, students may experience frustration or anxiety if they fail to achieve native-like pronunciation, which in turn can negatively affect motivation and classroom participation (Jenkins, 2009, p. 204).

In the present study, RP and GA serve as models: they provide concrete phonetic frameworks against which learners' segmental features can be compared. By positioning RP and GA as models, the study acknowledges the practical realities of instruction, namely that approximate alignment with a model may be a more realistic and informative outcome than full convergence (Timmis, 2002, p. 242). However, learners' model preferences and norm expectations do not emerge in a vacuum, they are not only shaped by the English they encounter inside but also outside school. Thus, the next section introduces the concept of EE.

2.4 Extramural English: exposure affecting production and perception

In recent years, the concept of EE has gained increasing attention in foreign-language research as a way of describing language contact that occurs outside the formal classroom environment. The term was introduced by Pia Sundqvist (2009) in her PhD study, investigating Swedish teenagers' exposure to EE. The term EE literally means "English outside the walls" (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 6) and refers to all kinds of contact learners have with English beyond the classroom. In this sense, EE is not part of the structured curriculum but encompasses the wide variety of informal, self-initiated, or incidental experiences in which learners hear, read, speak, or write in English in their free time. These experiences can include streaming platforms, social media, videogames, music, reading for pleasure or chatting online (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 935; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 7).

What distinguishes EE from traditional classroom learning is its informal and self-directed nature. This type of engagement is voluntary, interest-driven (Sundqvist, 2009, p. 26) and embedded in leisure activities rather than guided by explicit teaching goals. Learners are exposed to or engage with English because they *want* to rather than because they *have to*. EE can therefore be described as an independent area for language learning that complements formal instruction (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 11). This autonomy makes EE a highly individual phenomenon, varying greatly in frequency, purpose, and form among learners. Understanding EE as a self-directed and interest-driven phenomenon also requires recognising its measurable dimensions. While its informal nature makes it difficult to quantify, researchers have identified specific aspects that help describe how learners are exposed to or engage with English outside the classroom (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024).

In empirical terms, EE is characterised by two core dimensions: volume and quality of exposure. Volume refers to the frequency and duration of time learners spend on English-mediated activities outside class (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1644), while the quality refers to the nature of the activity (Fachriyany & Murtafi'ah, 2024, p. 170). Within EE, a further distinction is needed between exposure and engagement. Exposure generally refers to the receptive or passive contact learners have with English, such as listening, watching, or reading, in which they encounter the language without actively producing it (Sundqvist, 2009, p. 204). Engagement, in contrast,

denotes productive involvement with the language, including activities like speaking or writing in English, which require learners to actively formulate and produce language (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 120). In the current study, exposure is used as a general term to indicate that learners come into contact with English, while engagement is reserved for instances where this encounter is solely active. This distinction is relevant because it highlights the range of linguistic opportunities available outside the classroom and reflects the different degrees of cognitive and linguistic involvement that such activities might entail. In the present thesis, both active and passive activities are included in the questionnaire to capture a more nuanced picture of students' English use in their free time.

For this study, the focus lies specifically on social media as a prominent form of EE. Social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok or Instagram have become key environments where English functions as the language of communication, connecting users across linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 935). These platforms offer constant, multimodal exposure to spoken and written English through videos, captions, comments, and live interaction. What this means for learners is that digital media have transformed the ways young people access and use English, making out-of-school exposure both more frequent and more diverse. In Austria, as in many other European contexts, most adolescents encounter English daily through these media, even when they do not deliberately seek to practice the language (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, pp. 935–936; Schwarz, 2020, p. 212). For upper-secondary students in Austria, English use on digital platforms represents one of the most consistent and engaging sources of input beyond school (Sundqvist, 2024, p. 82), combining entertainment, identity expression, and social interaction. This makes it a powerful context for voluntary language development. From a pedagogical perspective, social media exemplifies how English has become part of young people's everyday lives rather than being confined to the EFL classroom (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 90). Understanding this form of EE is therefore crucial for interpreting how learners' exposure to English may shape their pronunciation preferences, accent awareness, and language attitudes.

Social media is thus particularly relevant for accent model perception and, consequently, pronunciation and accent development, because such platforms provide authentic models of spoken English. The constant exposure to English does not merely provide input, but also actively shapes learners' perceptions of various accents (Richter

& Weissenböck, 2021, p. 6). This means that when learners repeatedly encounter American English in films or on TikTok, or hear British English on the news, the contexts in which they encounter these varieties appear to reinforce certain perceptions concerning models, positioning British and American English as particularly desirable or legitimate. Importantly, these perceptions do not remain purely attitudinal, they can also shape learners' pronunciation directly. Unlike traditional classroom materials, which often rely on standardised native-speaker recordings, social media content presents a range of accents and speaking styles from native and non-native speakers alike. Learners can hear American, British, and numerous other varieties of English in natural contexts, often embedded in entertainment or personal communication. Through repetition and imitation, whether conscious or subconscious, these digital encounters may influence how learners perceive and produce sounds, demonstrating how social media enables learners to engage with spoken English in authentic, multimodal environments that support pronunciation improvement through increased input and interaction opportunities (Xodabande, 2017, p. 9). Especially TikTok has the potential to be an effective pronunciation-learning tool, as students benefit from short, engaging videos that model authentic pronunciation in a fun and motivating way (Adityo & Novitasari, 2023, p. 83). Platforms such as TikTok or Instagram support both dimensions of pronunciation learning. Through content consumption, they provide exposure to diverse accents (perception); through content creation, they allow users to practise pronunciation and experiment with different accents themselves (production), all in a low-stake environment.

Taken together, the constructs pronunciation, accent, intelligibility, comprehensibility, accentedness as well as model, norm and EE form a coherent pathway linking exposure and model perceptions to concrete production, thereby providing the conceptual backbone for this study.

3. Pronunciation in the EFL classroom

Building on the conceptual definitions introduced in the previous chapter, the following literature review situates the present study within the broader research on pronunciation in EFL contexts. This thesis examines learners' attitudes toward RP and GA, their exposure to English outside school, and the relationship between these factors and actual pronunciation performance. To ground this investigation, it is

necessary to outline the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform these areas. Accordingly, this chapter reviews the role of pronunciation in language learning, traces historical dominance of native speaker norms alongside their ongoing reconsideration and describes the characteristics of the two model accents central to the study. Beyond this, the chapter explores how learners perceive different English accents, how EE shapes both attitudes and production, and how pronunciation teaching practices manifest in the Austrian context. Together, these sections provide the pedagogical and sociolinguistic framework necessary for interpreting the findings presented later in this thesis.

3.1 The role of pronunciation in English language learning

As the central aim of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), communicative competence provides the foundational framework for understanding why pronunciation matters in EFL education. The term communicative competence was introduced by Dell Hymes (1992) as a response to Noam Chomsky's narrower concept of linguistic competence. Hymes (1992, pp. 37–38) proposed the term to argue that true language ability involves more than just knowing grammatical rules, but also the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately in real communication, integrating not only grammatical knowledge but also social awareness and strategic skill. This perspective emphasises that language learning should be guided by the learner's ability to interact meaningfully in social contexts, rather than by mastery of decontextualised forms alone. Pronunciation is therefore central to communicative competence, as it shapes learners' confidence, their construction of identity, and their participation in social interactions.

Crucially, successful communication depends on a speaker's ability to produce speech that listeners can decode with sufficient ease (Derwing, 2012, p. 2; Gilbert, 2008, p. 42; Yazan, 2015, p. 203). Even when a speaker's grammatical and lexical knowledge is relatively advanced, pronunciation difficulties can impede their ability to be understood, since accentedness, intelligibility and comprehensibility, the three constructs introduced in chapter 2.2, all must be considered for successful communication to occur (Derwing & Munro, 2022, p. 147). Even when speech is fully intelligible, a strong accent or high processing effort can still impede interaction, affecting conversational flow, willingness to communicate, and social evaluations of the speaker. Beyond its role in communicative success, pronunciation is deeply tied to

personal and social identity (Derwing, 2012, p. 3). Learners may perceive certain accents as indexing prestige, authenticity or group membership, and might either consciously pursue or avoid particular pronunciation targets depending on their linguistic identities and communicative goals. Given that pronunciation operates on both functional and symbolic levels, it occupies a uniquely complex position in English language teaching: the skill must be addressed not only as something to be mastered for clarity, but also as an expression of personal and social meaning.

Within the framework of communicative competence, pronunciation tends to receive comparatively limited attention in many EFL classrooms. Research has shown that pronunciation instruction is often marginalised in favour of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension (Foote et al., 2016, p. 181). The pervasive feeling among many instructors that time constraints make dedicated pronunciation instruction unfeasible (Gilbert, 2008, p. 1), a widespread belief that naturalistic exposure alone will lead to sufficient pronunciation development (Derwing & Munro, 2022, p. 147) and teachers' lack of formal training in phonetics and pronunciation pedagogy (Derwing & Munro, 2022, p. 154) are frequently cited reasons for the commonly observed neglect of pronunciation. Many instructors thus remain uncertain about how to structure effective pronunciation instruction and, therefore, avoid teaching it altogether (Derwing, 2012, p. 6). This neglect appears to persist despite a core pedagogical goal: ensuring that learners can speak with the clarity and intelligibility necessary to be understood when communicating in English (Derwing, 2012, p. 2).

Yet without formal pronunciation instruction, students frequently remain uncertain about what pronunciation goals they should realistically or desirably pursue. Many learners often seem to struggle with the question of whether they should aim for a native-like accent or simply an accent that can be easily understood. Others, however, are not even conscious that they have a pronunciation goal to consider. Despite the empirical reality that achieving a native-like accent is relatively rare and not necessary for effective communication, the native speaker ideal remains prevalent in many contexts (Levis, 2018, p. 11). This tension between aspiration and attainability complicates both learners' as well as teachers' expectations, leaving teachers unclear which pronunciation goals should guide classroom practice.

Traditionally, native accents, most notably RP and more recently GA, have served as reference points in European classrooms, reflecting historical, cultural and educational

traditions rather than empirical communicative needs (Sewell, 2016, p. 92). Native accents continue to influence teaching materials (Kiczowski, 2025, p. 2922), high-stakes examinations (Cheng, 2002, p. 91), and teacher beliefs (Colmenero Pérez, 2024, p. 93). However, scholars of ELF have long questioned whether a native-like accent should remain the default instructional target, especially in contexts where English functions predominantly as an international language among non-native speakers (Jenkins, 1998, p. 119; Levis, 2018, p. 16). Therefore, an intelligibility-centred approach has been proposed as a more realistic and pedagogically sound alternative, emphasising the features that most affect cross-linguistic communication rather than those that distinguish different native accents. Nonetheless, many learners continue to associate native accents with prestige or legitimacy, while teachers often feel uncertain about how to balance intelligibility goals with learners' affective preferences. Compounding this issue is the increasing influence of EE exposure on learners' pronunciation development.

As mentioned in chapter 2.4, EE activities expose learners to highly variable and often mixed accent input. As research indicates, this exposure can significantly shape learners' phonetic development, sometimes more strongly than classroom instruction (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1642). Learners may therefore develop pronunciation features that diverge from the model introduced in school materials, leading to hybrid accent profiles or fluctuating phonetic realisations (Sewell, 2016, p. 92). This trend is also observable in Austria, where students' exposure to English often extends far beyond the classroom through media consumption, gaming, and social networks (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 935; Schwarz, 2020, p. 212), meaning that their developing pronunciation may diverge from textbook norms (Gamsjäger, 2024, p. 89). At the same time, Austrian curricula emphasise communicative competence and intelligibility (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 936), but without always explicitly defining which pronunciation goals should be pursued. This creates a degree of ambiguity for both learners and teachers whether RP, GA, or more flexible intelligibility-based targets should guide instructional practice. As a result, pronunciation teaching in Austria operates within a landscape shaped by traditional standard accents, contemporary communicative frameworks, and rapidly changing patterns of English exposure, each exerting different pressures on learners' beliefs, teachers' practices, and institutional expectations. This persistent lack of clarity about what pronunciation goal should guide

instruction lies at the heart of contemporary debates in pronunciation research and pedagogy.

Before examining learner attitudes or instructional practices, it is therefore necessary to scrutinize the conceptual foundation that shapes what teachers and learners seem to expect from pronunciation instruction: the native speaker norm and alternatives that have emerged in response to global English use. The following section thus turns to the status of the native speaker norm, its historical dominance in EFL settings, and the theoretical and pedagogical alternatives proposed in recent decades.

3.2 The native speaker norm and emerging alternatives

For much of the history of English language teaching, the native speaker has been positioned as the unquestioned goal for learners to emulate. This orientation is rooted in the long-standing belief that having a native accent not only leads to successful communication but also makes the speaker seem more prestigious and confident (Levis, 2020, p. 318). In Europe, RP served as the principal reference point for decades, valued for its association with social status and institutional authority. More recently, GA has become similarly widely recognised, supported through media dominance as well as the growing cultural and political influence of the United States (Lipinska, 2023, p. 97). This historical dominance of the native speaker norm is closely tied to broader ideological assumptions about language ownership and legitimacy. The ideology of “native-speakerism” (Holliday, 2008, p. 123) positions native speakers as the ideal teachers, the best role models and the rightful authorities over the English language. Such assumptions shaped learners’ expectations, teaching materials, and assessment criteria for decades. Students were long encouraged to imitate these standard varieties. In this pedagogical tradition, deviation from the native norm was framed as a deficiency rather than a natural part of second language learning development.

Empirical studies confirm that this native speaker orientation has strongly shaped learner attitudes. Scales et al. (2006), for example, found that university students consistently ranked native speaker accents as the most desirable goal and judged them as sounding more competent, even when they could not accurately distinguish between specific native varieties. Similarly, Tsang (2020) reported that Hong Kong secondary-school students expressed a strong aspiration to sound like native speakers, with many perceiving accented speech as a marker of lower proficiency.

Underlying these aspirations is the persistent social belief that a native-like accent is synonymous with linguistic excellence. Accordingly, many learners equate accent reduction with increased competence, even though accent alone is a poor indicator of communicative ability. Contrary to these beliefs, a strong accent does not appear to hinder intelligibility, as listeners quickly adapt to different speech patterns, making accent one of the least relevant factors for successful communication (Munro, 2011, p. 9). These findings demonstrate that the “nativeness principle” (Levis, 2020, p. 314) continues to influence learner expectations, despite perpetuating an unattainable target that is misaligned with communicative priorities.

However, contemporary pronunciation research challenges these long-standing assumptions by emphasising intelligibility, listener perception, and identity expression as central goals of instruction. This shift is informed by empirical evidence showing that a native-like accent is not only unnecessary for effective communication but also rarely achievable for learners. Attaining a native-like accent in adulthood is extremely uncommon, since even highly proficient learners often retain detectable non-native features despite years of instruction (Levis, 2018, p. 11). A persistent non-native accent is thus a normal and expected outcome of EFL learning rather than a sign of failure. Therefore, the insistence on native norms is misaligned with the realities of global English use (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 200–201). In international encounters, where English often functions as a *Lingua Franca*, communication typically occurs between non-native speakers. Given that in such conversations the primary goal is simply to understand one another and make oneself understood, speakers’ diverse accents do not impede intelligibility.

Munro and Derwing (1995, 2015, 2020) have repeatedly demonstrated that heavily accented speech can still be highly understandable and that accent reduction beyond a certain threshold offers no additional communicative benefit. They have thus argued that intelligibility and comprehensibility, the listener-centred constructs introduced in chapter 2.2, rather than nativeness, should be the primary instructional goal. This means that assessment scales for speaking, for instance, should no longer focus on insignificant issues, such as the degree to which a student’s speech is accented (Munro & Derwing, 2020, p. 301). A further dimension of modern research concerns identity (Atkinson et al., 2025, p. 59). Accents are not neutral, as they carry social meaning and reflect personal history. However, perspectives that position identity preservation and intelligibility-focused instruction as mutually exclusive are contested,

as they often disregard learner agency. This means that learners themselves frequently seek explicit pronunciation instruction to enhance their professional and social communication (Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 485). Thus, a balanced approach, which accounts for learners' needs, aims and agency is required, framing intelligibility not as an erasure of identity, but as a means to achieve clearer self-expression.

Despite the theoretical and pedagogical shift towards intelligibility, empirical research shows that many learners continue to strive for a native-like accent. Scales et al. (2006, p. 734), in their study of university students in the United States from various Asian language backgrounds, found that more than 50% of participants named sounding like a native speaker as their pronunciation goal. Similarly, Timmis (2002, pp. 244–245), drawing on questionnaire data from over 400 students across 14 different countries, reports that a clear majority of students expressed a preference for conforming to native speaker norms. Tsang, (2020), in his study of university students majoring in different disciplines in Hong Kong, also reported that participants not only rated native-sounding speakers higher for comprehensibility, but more strongly associated their accent with greater suitability for teaching English and with positive personal attributes such as likability and professionalism. A tension therefore emerges between students' continued aspiration for a native-like accent and the current pedagogical emphasis on intelligibility in the EFL classroom.

As illustrated, learners' aspirations appear to be influenced by ideological prestige rather than linguistic reality (Jenkins, 2009, p. 204). Exposure to media, school practices, and societal attitudes may reinforce the desirability of native accents, even when teaching aims have moved away from that ideal. Learners' goals may thus not match current pedagogical aims, thereby creating a mismatch between what teachers teach, what students want, and what learners are exposed to. Therefore, learners may resist intelligibility-focused goals if they perceive such aims as insufficiently ambitious, while teachers might be reluctant to reinforce native norms that are out of step with communicative realities of English as a global language. Moreover, digital environments expose learners to a wide range of accents, making it increasingly difficult to justify adherence to a single model.

To fully understand this tension between aspirational native norms and communicative realities, it is necessary to examine more closely the accent models that have historically dominated EFL settings. The following section therefore introduces RP and

GA as the two principal reference accents that underpin learner perceptions, instructional materials, and pronunciation research.

3.3 Accent models: RP and GA

A central pillar of any examination of pronunciation learning in EFL is the concept of a target model, discussed in detail in chapter 2.3. The learner's notion of desirable pronunciation is not formed in a vacuum but is shaped by explicit instructional targets and implicit exposure to different English accents. For Austrian learners specifically, this means navigating a pronounced dichotomy: a formal education system with mostly enduring ties to the British English accent, and a digital-social sphere saturated with American English linguistic input. This chapter thus examines these two accents in more detail.

Received Pronunciation (RP), traditionally regarded as the prestige accent of England, is a class-based variety with its origins among a small elite (Hazen, 2017, p. 190). Its canonical status was achieved *inter alia* through the BBC, which deliberately selected RP as its broadcast standard in the 1920s under the direction of its first director-general, John Reith, who believed that this accent would educate and unify the nation, an institutional endorsement that effectively conferred upon RP the status of the voice of authority in British public life (Mugglestone, 2015, p. 30). The political significance of RP also reflected broader class structures, as the monarchy, aristocracy, and public schools historically served as the social institutions through which RP was cultivated and transmitted (Hughes et al., 2013, p. 3). RP has been perceived as a socially neutral and regionally unmarked accent (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 205), yet England itself exhibits remarkable accent diversity with scholars documenting a wealth of variation across the country's regional accents (Docherty et al., 2024, p. 70). However, due to its perceived neutrality and its codified phonetic description, RP became the default teaching model across Europe throughout much of the 20th century (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 54).

In many EFL contexts, particularly in regions with historical or cultural ties to Britain, RP functions as the prestige target learners were expected to emulate. This tradition remains visible in many European countries (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 203), including Austria, where textbooks, classroom materials, listening tasks (Gamsjäger, 2025, p. 103), and teacher training programmes continue to draw mainly on RP-like speech (Richter & Weissenböck, 2022, p. 2). Even though contemporary classroom

practice may be less prescriptive than in previous decades (Foote, 2017, p. 286), RP still appears to enjoy symbolic status as a marker of correctness and sophistication. As a result, learners may perceive RP as the English they are expected to learn in class, regardless of whether they personally prefer or encounter other varieties more frequently outside school.

Nonetheless, in Europe, the RP model is currently being challenged by another model accent, namely General American (GA), not only outside but also inside the classroom. GA is commonly defined as a non-regional U.S. accent (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 206) used in national broadcasting (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 54) and associated with mainstream American culture rather than a specific geographical or social group. However, some scholars claim that this standard accent is a myth, as there is substantial accent variation throughout the United States (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 203). GA, nevertheless, appears to be the second most important standard accent model alongside RP, partly due to its global spread in the last few decades. This dispersion is largely tied to the international visibility of American films, television, pop music, video games, and, more recently, social media platforms. In contrast to the institutional prominence of RP, GA has thus gained its dominance primarily through global media, entertainment, and digital communication (Richter & Weissenböck, 2021, p. 8). Therefore, young people today seem to be exposed to far more GA than RP in their everyday lives, meaning GA exposure is not primarily mediated by formal instruction but occurs spontaneously and in high volumes through digital and popular media.

Prior to the social media era, Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997, p. 126) showed that RP was the preferred accent among advanced Austrian EFL learners at the time. Their findings also revealed that personal contact and familiarity shaped students' accent preferences. Decades later, Dalton-Puffer et al.'s discoveries still appear to hold true. However, the personal contact students have with English has shifted. For earlier generations of students, English was encountered predominantly through textbooks and formal instruction. Today's learners, by contrast, are immersed in a digital-social sphere dominated by GA. American English has become increasingly influential among European adolescents precisely because of its strong presence in youth culture and online media. Syranyan and Westphal's (2021, pp. 82–83) comparative study, for instance, finds that while students in Germany and Armenia overtly preferred RP as a formal teaching model, they strongly associated GA with mass media, modernity and

global presence. Consequently, GA now appears to function as an unofficial global reference accent (Ferragne et al., 2024, p. 1), sustained through constant, informal exposure rather than institutional sanction, and positions itself as a powerful competitor to RP in shaping learners' subconscious accent preferences and phonological development. As a result, students may associate RP with prestige and educational value, yet their high exposure to American English makes this accent the most familiar and comprehensible one for real-world interaction. Indeed, research indicates that many learners hold the view that there should be a focus on a standard accent for pronunciation instruction, expressing concerns about being exposed to various English varieties (Sung, 2016, p. 198). The tension between these two accents thus leads learners to exhibit complex, sometimes ambivalent attitudes.

Despite RP's long-standing position as the accent in EFL learning and teaching, these developments show a growing divergence between the pronunciation input learners receive in school and the diverse linguistic environment they experience in their daily lives. This creates a pronounced model-exposure mismatch, in which the formal target presented in the classroom is increasingly out of sync with the accent learners encounter, imitate, and internalise outside school. Such discrepancies have important implications. When instructional models conflict with learners' habitual input, students may struggle to align their pronunciation goals with their actual exposure patterns, leading to fluctuating preferences or uncertainty about which accent they should, or realistically can, aim for. How students interpret, value, and respond to these competing models is therefore crucial. The next section thus examines learner attitudes towards English accents, exploring how such beliefs shape what learners aim for in their own pronunciation.

3.4 Learner attitudes toward English accents

Learner attitudes constitute a central factor in pronunciation development, as they influence what learners notice in input, what features they attempt to imitate and how they evaluate both their own speech and that of others. Clearly, pronunciation learning is not solely a linguistic process but also a social and psychological one. Learners may aspire to work towards speaking the native-like accent of a particular linguistic community they relate to or might aim for a more neutral and easily understandable accent (Roberts, 2020, pp. 182–183). This choice appears to be guided by beliefs about correctness, prestige, identity and communicative needs. Understanding such

attitudes is therefore essential for interpreting learners' pronunciation choices in educational settings.

A substantial body of research has shown that many learners continue to idealise native speaker accents, especially canonical forms of British and American English. Scales et al. (2006, p. 735), for instance, found that Asian university students strongly preferred native speaker accents and associated them with higher levels of correctness and credibility, yet the learners often struggled to reliably identify the very accents they claimed to prefer, illustrating a persistent gap between aspiration and perceptual ability. Mahboob (2004, pp. 8–9) reports similar findings among Pakistani learners, who viewed native speakers as an ideal model when it comes to pronunciation and oral skills in general, granting native speakers with linguistic authority. Similarly, Tsang (2020, p. 152) reported that tertiary-level learners from Hong Kong were much more positive towards native accents when it came to evaluating teachers' accents, with interviewees being particularly critical of foreign-accented teachers. These learners often regarded such teachers as poor models and unqualified for their role, a perception that could adversely affect both understanding and attention in the classroom. Such attitudes are deeply rooted in traditional EFL teaching paradigms, where a native-like accent has long been positioned as the unquestioned goal for pronunciation and communicative competence (see chapter 3.2). This is why it might be difficult for learners to imagine an EFL classroom without a native speaker norm at the core of pronunciation instruction.

Despite the enduring appeal of native norms, recent studies suggest that learners' attitudes are gradually becoming more complex and differentiated. Roberts (2020, p. 203), for example, observed that many of the Flemish secondary-school learners she questioned expressed ambivalence: they may admire native accents but also recognise that such targets are difficult to attain and not necessarily required for effective communication. Tsang (2024, pp. 10–11) likewise found that EFL secondary students from Hong Kong often endorse a native-like accent for symbolic reasons, such as prestige or perceived authenticity, but simultaneously prioritise intelligibility in practical communication. This dual orientation reveals tensions between aspirational ideals and communicative realities.

A central reason for these tensions is the globalisation of English and the linguistic diversity of English users. The insistence on native norms has become increasingly

misaligned with global patterns of English use, where most communication involves non-native speakers interacting with each other rather than with native speakers (Jenkins, 2009, p. 204). As mentioned before (see chapter 2.3), in such contexts, intelligibility rather than nativeness becomes the relevant communicative goal. This is supported by the work of Munro and Derwing (2020, p. 301), whose research demonstrates that listeners could process and understand even strongly accented speech with little difficulty, suggesting that in practical terms, non-native pronunciation is often not a barrier to comprehension and may not be heavily scrutinized by interlocutors in functional communication. At the same time, learners' attitudes appear increasingly shaped by patterns of exposure rather than by formal instruction alone. As mentioned in chapter 3.5, digital media and global entertainment industries now play a central role in shaping learners' preferences, with American English, particularly, gaining prominence through music, film, online videos, and social media. Exposure has been identified as a major factor influencing learners' accent preferences. Students tend to favour accents they encounter frequently and, thus, find familiar (Tsang, 2024, p. 11). Therefore, repeated exposure to certain varieties, especially through informal, everyday channels, can gradually shift learners' perceptions of what sounds natural, attainable, or desirable (Lenhardt and Meer, 2025, p. 6). This suggests that attitudes are not static but evolve dynamically as learners' exposure patterns change, especially in adolescence when identity negotiation is salient.

Taken together, these findings present a complex picture: many advanced learners continue to attach prestige and symbolic value to native accents, while at the same time acknowledging that intelligibility and communicative success may be more relevant in their actual communicative environments. Learners often aspire to obtain a native-like accent on an ideological level yet orient their everyday speech and preferences toward accents they find familiar, understandable, and accessible through ongoing exposure. This coexistence of symbolic admiration for native norms and pragmatic orientation toward intelligibility highlights the multifaceted nature of learner attitudes. Such attitudes do not form in isolation but develop at the intersection of instructional targets and input encountered beyond the classroom. This interplay raises important questions about the role of EE in shaping learners' accent preferences, beliefs, and pronunciation outcomes, which is addressed in the following section.

3.5 EE and the expanding role of exposure

In recent decades, the role of out-of-school exposure in EFL research has received growing scholarly attention, particularly under the umbrella term EE. This term refers to any contact with English that occurs outside formal instructional settings, a concept explored in detail in chapter 2.4. Such contact includes both receptive activities such as watching videos, listening to music, or scrolling through social media as well as productive activities such as chatting online, gaming with voice communication, or posting content (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 120). A substantial body of research (Henderson et al., 2015; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024) has demonstrated that such exposure not only supplements classroom learning but increasingly functions as a major driver of language development among adolescents in Europe and globally. As English infiltrates youth culture, entertainment, and digital communication, EE has become a central, and in some cases dominant, source of linguistic input, with profound implications for learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, and communicative habits.

A growing number of empirical studies highlight the positive association between EE and a range of language competences. Listening to English music, for instance, emerges as the most frequent EE activity across diverse learner populations. Among both Scandinavian and Asian learners aged 15–25, this form of passive, receptive exposure has been shown to significantly predict learners' positive self-assessments of their speaking competence, including oral fluency and accuracy (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1657). Similarly, Spanish secondary school students who are frequently exposed to English-language music gain access to authentic colloquial vocabulary, common sentence structures, and pronunciation patterns, a connection that correlates positively with their English grades and thus appears to support better academic performance in the EFL classroom (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024, p. 10). The picture becomes even more nuanced when considering other EE activities, particularly gaming.

Unlike predominantly passive consumptions of music, gaming is typically interactive, immersive, and often socially collaborative. Some research suggests that playing video games negatively correlates with academic language performance. However, such findings warrant careful interpretation, since the type of game and its linguistic input, often diverging from contents taught in EFL classrooms (e.g., vocabulary), play a

decisive role (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024, p. 11). Indeed, robust evidence from Swedish learners demonstrates that frequent gaming correlates strongly with vocabulary gains (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012, p. 313), with both the amount of time spent gaming and the types of games played shaping vocabulary outcomes. Notably, players of massively multiplayer games and multiplayer games achieved the highest scores, likely since these genres demand sustained interaction with other players, often through text-based or voice chat (Sundqvist, 2019, p. 104). Beyond vocabulary and speaking skills, EE also shapes pronunciation and phonological awareness.

While explicit phonetic and oral instruction remains crucial, repeated and varied exposure to spoken English outside the classroom creates opportunities for the natural acquisition of segmental and suprasegmental patterns. Although not focussing on pronunciation specifically, Sundqvist (2009, p. 146) found a significant positive correlation between students' total time spent on EE activities and their overall oral proficiency, with a subsequent regression analysis ranking reading, listening to music, and watching TV as the most influential activities for oral development. More recently, Banzina (2025, p. 68) directly examined the relationship between EE and pronunciation. Surveying Latvian first-year university students, she reported that EE activities, particularly watching movies and TV shows in English, had the most significant influence on their pronunciation development, outweighing formal classroom instruction. This pedagogical reality is widely recognized, as evidenced by Schurz and Sundqvist (2022, pp. 951–952), whose analysis of teacher reports from Austria, Finland, France, and Sweden, found a strong consensus on the importance of establishing a connection between EE and formal ELT. Given this powerful influence of EE, it is crucial to note a key feature of the changing media landscape: American English dominating digital and streaming platforms, which may unconsciously shift learners' pronunciation targets (Richter & Weissenbäck, 2022, p. 2).

Research indicates that this shift toward American English in EE is a widespread phenomenon. For instance, the above-mentioned study of Latvian university students found that 81% of their extramural input was American English, primarily sourced from popular TV channels and YouTube (Banzina, 2025, p. 68). A similar media-driven landscape exists in Austria, where young people's everyday English contact is highly individualized but dominated by receptive activities like watching films, series, and online videos (Smit & Schwarz, 2019, pp. 308–309). While this study does not explicitly quantify the variety of English in this input, it can be reasonably inferred that a

significant portion is American English, given the dominance of the U.S. in global social media, streaming platforms, and the film entertainment industry. Thus, given the scale and nature of this exposure, a central question for pedagogy emerges: How should Austrian EFL classrooms account for the pronounced influence of American English acquired outside of school?

3.6 Pronunciation teaching and accent preferences in Austria

The Austrian national educational standards for English (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2009), established in federal regulation, place strong emphasis on communicative competence, real-world language use, and intelligibility. They define students' competencies in terms of what learners can do with the language, such as understanding the main points of conversations, participating in everyday dialogues, and expressing feelings or experiences in simple, connected sentences, rather than focusing on abstract grammatical knowledge or formal correctness (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2009, pp. 15–16). Despite this explicit real-world orientation, classroom materials, most notably textbooks, appear to continue to use British English as the primary reference model. At the same time, learners' everyday linguistic environments are increasingly saturated with American English input through EE, especially via digital media and entertainment. This coexistence of divergent models creates a unique constellation of pedagogical expectations and learner experiences. Understanding pronunciation learning in Austria, therefore, requires a closer examination of both institutional guidelines and the linguistic realities that shape students' attitudes and preferences.

The Austrian national educational standards for English (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2009), which are mandated for 8th grade in lower-secondary education (Mittelschule and AHS), conceptualise communicative competences as the overarching learning goal for English across all compulsory educational levels. In line with contemporary CLT principles, they highlight intelligibility, appropriateness in context, and functional language use as central outcomes rather than native-like accuracy. These educational standards (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2009, p. 16) explicitly state that learners should be able to initiate, maintain, and have simple conversations on familiar topics; express and react to feelings; manage everyday situations; and give simple explanations and instructions. Thus, these standards focus on communicating effectively in diverse

settings and encourage the development of strategies that support mutual understanding. Crucially, this document does not prescribe a specific accent model, nor does it equate successful communication with native-like pronunciation. Yet, despite this emphasis on communicative success, various teaching materials continue to reference British English, specifically, standard British pronunciation, as the default accent model for teaching. Many productive pronunciation tasks, and, generally, textbook series used in Austrian classrooms still rely predominately on RP (Gamsjäger, 2024), reflecting a persistence of native-speaker norms that is not mandated by the national standards.

The institutional preference reflects a long historical tradition in Austrian EFL education, discussed in chapter 3.3, where British English has been associated with academic prestige, correctness, and educational legitimacy. However, it increasingly contrasts with learners' linguistic environments outside the classroom. Current research by Richter and Weissenböck (2021, p. 8) substantiates this view, suggesting the long-standing dominance of British English in Europe is being challenged by media-related surge in American English. While many experienced EFL teachers were educated to aim for a British English accent, they increasingly find their learners socialised in American English, leading to a marked discrepancy between what is taught in class and what is learned outside. This divergence is not only evident in media exposure but also reflected in the textbooks and resources used for instruction.

Research on teaching materials supports this discrepancy. In a recent analysis of the Austrian textbook series for lower-secondary education, Gamsjäger (2024, p. 97) observed that materials intended for pronunciation teaching in the *easy* (Banick & Preedy, 2023) series continue to privilege British English, with the majority of phonetic transcriptions and pronunciation exercises promoting RP. This imbalance may inadvertently misrepresent the linguistic diversity of English and reduce opportunities for learners to develop awareness and tolerance of accent variation. Similarly, the *MORE!* schoolbook series (Gerngross et al., 2023), often used in Austrian lower-secondary classes, consistently features predominantly British English accents in its audio, multimedia and pronunciation components (Gamsjäger, 2024, p. 85). This narrow focus reinforces the institutional model at the expense of exposing students to the broader spectrum of global Englishes they encounter in daily life, nor does it reflect the predominantly American English input Austrian students are likely to receive through EE (e.g., social media).

In upper-secondary education, this concentration on one accent seems to shift, as schoolbooks begin to offer more linguistic variety by intentionally incorporating a wider range of English accents. For instance, the Austrian upper-secondary textbook series *way2go!* (Born-Lechleitner et al., 2023) includes listening materials that expose students not only to British English, but also other native and global varieties. The authors themselves state that the series incorporates real contributions from FM4 and the BBC to ensure the teaching of authentic English, thereby moving beyond a single model (Österreichischer Bundesverlag Schulbuch, 2021). However, unlike Gamsjäger's (2024) comprehensive analysis of pronunciation activities in two lower-secondary coursebooks, no equivalent research has been conducted on accent variety and pronunciation instruction in upper-secondary textbooks. This gap leaves the extent to which these materials genuinely reflect linguistic diversity and support learners' exposure to global Englishes largely unexplored. Consequently, the stated progression towards diversity does not fully resolve the core conflict between external exposure and internal educational standards.

Taken together, these findings reveal a striking pedagogical tension: while Austrian learners are surrounded by GA exposure through EE, the formal school environment continues to mostly frame RP as the authoritative target. This duality may lead to uncertainty about what counts as desirable pronunciation, potentially affecting learners' pronunciation goals and speaking confidence. Yet, despite its relevance, little empirical research has examined how Austrian learners themselves perceive and evaluate different accents, and how they navigate the RP-GA dichotomy, or how their pronunciation patterns align with their stated preferences. Even fewer studies have investigated how EE might influence pronunciation production in Austrian schools, despite mounting evidence that out-of-school exposure plays a central role in shaping linguistic behaviour among adolescents.

This gap is notable for several reasons. First, although studies from other contexts (Lenhardt & Meer, 2025; Roberts, 2020; Scales et al., 2006; Seyranyan & Westphal, 2021; Tsang, 2020) demonstrate that learners' accent attitudes influence which accents they notice, imitate, and value, similar insights are only beginning to emerge in Austrian research. Several Austrian studies, mostly conducted by master-level students, have examined pronunciation instruction and related factors. These include Gamsjäger (2024) on pronunciation models in coursebooks; Pointner (2022) on task formats for younger versus adult learners; Hasenberger (2012) on textbook authors'

neglect of pronunciation; Richter and Weissenböck (2021) on pre-service teachers' accent preferences; and Schwarz (2020) as well as Schurz and Sundqvist (2022) on EE practices and their classroom implications. However, without understanding learners' perspectives, it proves difficult to design pronunciation instruction that aligns with their linguistic realities and communicative needs. Second, the strong presence of GA in EE suggests that learners may be developing pronunciation patterns that diverge from school-based expectations, creating potential mismatches between instruction, assessment, and performance. Finally, as pronunciation is deeply connected to identity, belonging, and linguistic self-esteem, failing to acknowledge the influences of EE may risk overlooking how students negotiate their own linguistic identities in an increasingly globalised English-speaking world.

Against this backdrop, several key points emerge. Pronunciation is central to communicative competence, yet it remains one of the most undervalued areas of EFL pedagogy. Native speaker norms continue to exert ideological influence, even as intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and identity expression gain traction in contemporary research. RP and GA retain their status as traditional pronunciation targets, but exposure patterns have shifted dramatically: Austrian learners seem to encounter far more GA than RP in their everyday digital lives. This produces a pedagogical and perceptual tension within the Austrian EFL context, where classroom instruction often diverges from learners' linguistic experiences outside school.

It is precisely this tension that motivates the present study. Specifically, this thesis investigates how Austrian upper-secondary students perceive and evaluate different accent models, namely RP and GA, and how these perceptions relate to their actual pronunciation performance. By examining both learners' attitudes and their production of key segmental features, the study seeks to examine whether their speech aligns with their own description of their accent and what role EE plays in this context. To address this aim, the study combines questionnaire data with phonetic analysis of a reading task. This mixed-methods approach makes it possible to explore connections between perception, exposure, and production that might otherwise remain hidden. By investigating the interplay between learners' attitudes, their EE engagement, and their phonetic output, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of pronunciation development in contemporary Austrian EFL classrooms, one that accounts for both the attitudes learners bring to the classroom and the linguistic input they encounter beyond it.

4. Methodology

Building on the theoretical foundations established in the preceding sections, the following chapter outlines the methodological framework of the present study. It first presents the rationale and research questions that guided the investigation, followed by a detailed description of the research design, participants, and setting. The final sections explain the procedures for data collection and analysis, providing a clear overview of how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived.

4.1 Research questions

As the previous chapters have shown, pronunciation and accent awareness have received increasing attention in English language education. Yet empirical research directly connecting students' self-reported preferences for particular English accents with their actual pronunciation performance remains limited. This gap is precisely what motivates the methodological approach outlined in the following sections.

Considering these research gaps, the present thesis aims to answer the following main research question:

How do Austrian upper-secondary EFL students' perceptions of English accent models correspond to their actual pronunciation performance?

To operationalize this question, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. How do students describe their own accent when speaking English?
2. How do students perceive the role of different types of EE activities in shaping their pronunciation?
3. Which typical features of GA or RP are present in students' reading-aloud task (e.g., rhotic /r/ and tapping/flapping)?
4. What patterns emerge between the students' self-perceived accent in English and their actual pronunciation performance?

By answering these questions, the present study examines the relationship between Austrian upper-secondary students' perceptions of English model accents and their actual pronunciation performance. It further investigates which accent students report preferring, how they perceive native-like accents in relation to intelligibility, and what role EE plays in shaping these attitudes. In addition, the study assesses the extent and nature of students' exposure to English outside the classroom and explores how this

exposure may relate to their awareness and perception of different accents. Finally, by linking questionnaire responses to recorded speech from a reading-aloud task, the study seeks to identify whether the students' stated model preferences are reflected in their actual production.

Conducted in collaboration with my former mentor at an Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule (AHS) in Vienna, this research aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners perceive and produce English accents. By examining the interplay between learners' attitudes, their EE engagement, and their phonetic output, the study highlights the growing influence of informal language exposure beyond the classroom. Understanding these relationships can inform more contextually appropriate pronunciation teaching practices, helping educators in Austria align instructional goals with learners' real-world experiences, motivations, and linguistic realities.

4.2 Research design

To adequately address the derived research questions, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative data from student recordings. This design enables a comprehensive exploration of how learners' attitudes towards English accent models correspond to their actual pronunciation performance. Mixed-methods research was chosen since it provides a richer level of insight by combining numerical trends with detailed, context-sensitive data, thus enabling deeper and more nuanced interpretations than either method alone (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 45). The methodological triangulation not only strengthens the validity of the findings but also reveals potential discrepancies between learners' conscious attitudes and their unconscious linguistic behaviour.

The first type of data consists of questionnaire responses, as questionnaires are particularly suitable for attitudinal research and allow researchers to collect standardised data effectively (Dewaele, 2018, pp. 270–272). The questionnaire, which is described in more detail in the instruments and data collection section (see chapter 4.4.1), was designed to capture students' attitudes towards RP and GA and includes Likert scale items, multiple-choice questions and a number of open questions prompted from a previously validated instrument in the literature (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024). The questionnaire also examined the frequency and type of EE exposure, such as music, online videos, video games, reading, and social media. Further, the

questionnaire explored whether students regard achieving a native-like accent as a desirable or necessary goal for successful communication and language learning.

The second type of data was derived from audio recordings collected from each participant. The recordings consisted of one reading aloud task in which students read aloud a story, the specifics of which are outlined further in chapter 4.4.2. The story was generated with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) and subsequently adapted to include selected words and phrases containing pronunciation features typically associated with RP and GA. This task allowed for controlled comparison across participants and followed established practices in pronunciation research, as controlled reading tasks are recognized for their reliability and replicability in detecting accent-related features (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 23). Moreover, such tasks facilitate a clearer assessment of segmental accuracy by reducing the influence of external linguistic variables like vocabulary or syntax (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 24), since students only need to read the presented text and focus on pronunciation, without worrying about appropriate vocabulary or correct sentence structure.

Although questionnaires and recordings offer valuable insights, their methodological limitations must be accounted for. As designing questionnaires has become relatively easy, the ease of their construction can mask deeper issues with validity, reliability, and the tendency for instruments to be used in non-standardised ways that compromise the accuracy of collected data (Kukshinov et al., 2024, pp. 6–7). This is particularly problematic as inaccurate or unreliable data can lead to incorrect conclusions, affecting both theoretical understanding and practical applications derived from research findings. This risk is further compounded by what Dewaele (2018, p. 270) describes as the tendency to underestimate the preparation process, which can lead to lower quality research instruments and, consequently, less reliable findings. To address these methodological concerns, the present questionnaire was carefully designed by deriving questions from established literature to ensure theoretical grounding and content validity. The instrument was further developed to be clear, age-appropriate and easy to understand for upper-secondary students, as it was written in English using vocabulary and sentence structures suited to their proficiency level. Lastly, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to ensure that the instrument aligned with the overall research objectives and the data collected would be reliable and meaningful.

Similarly, the recording task also presented certain limitations. While controlled reading passages provided consistency and comparability across speakers, they captured only regulated pronunciation rather than spontaneous language use. The artificial nature of such tasks may therefore reduce generalizability to real-world communication, as learners are not required to plan, construct and retrieve language in real time (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 24). However, given the scope and comparative focus of this study, a reading passage instead of a more unrestricted task (e.g., picture story) was used to ensure a high degree of control and consistency across participants, thereby allowing for more precise analysis of pronunciation features associated with RP and GA.

4.3 Participants and setting

As already stated above, the study was conducted at an AHS in Vienna, where I had completed my practicum the previous semester. I asked my mentor teacher to recruit upper-secondary classes, and the participant group consequently consisted of two upper-secondary EFL classes, namely fifth grade, completing their school leaving exam in the same year. Thus, the learners were between 17 to 19 years old. Table 1 shows more detailed information regarding the sample size and age of the participants.

Table 1. *Demographic data of the sample size*

Variable	Details
Total participants recruited	31
Final sample size	30
Age (years)	$M = 18.20$, $Mdn = 18$, $SD = 0.61$

As can be seen, 31 students participated, which was an appropriate number for a study of this exploratory nature. Of these 31 participating students, 21 reported German as the primary language spoken at home. The remaining 10 students also mentioned German but indicated multilingual home environments, including the following languages: Bulgarian, Serbian, Slovakian, Croatian, Russian and Dutch. One student only indicated Albanian as the language they speak at home. Furthermore, three of the students reported English as a language they speak at home as well as German or other languages. For inclusion in the study, participants were required to complete both components: the questionnaire and the recording of the reading task. One learner was unable to complete the recording due to time constraints and was subsequently

excluded. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 30 EFL learners. Notably, both English teachers of these students speak with an American accent.

Prior to the data collection, students were informed about the purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions. The key points were reiterated at the beginning of both the questionnaire and the recording session to ensure full understanding. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the start of each task, and it was communicated that participation was entirely voluntary. The questionnaire was completed individually on students' mobile phones, while the reading task was recorded by me using my personal mobile device to ensure consistent and high-quality audio recordings.

Data collection sessions were conducted on two separate days at the selected school. All participants, therefore, completed both tasks under similar conditions. The sessions took place in a separate, quiet room where I was alone with one student at a time. To ensure consistency and high-quality audio recordings, participants used my mobile device to record themselves reading the text. They were instructed to start and stop the recording independently. After finishing the recording, students typed their full name as the file name to ensure correct spelling and to enable accurate matching with their corresponding questionnaire responses. During the reading task, I did not interfere beyond instructing students to read the text as loudly as possible and reassuring them that making errors was acceptable, as they could simply repeat themselves if needed. Once a student completed the task, they were sent back to class, and I invited the next student into the room.

4.4 Instruments and data collection

As clarified in chapter 4.2, the current study used questionnaires and recordings to collect data. The utilized research instruments are described in more detail in the following section.

4.4.1 Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was developed using SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2024) to examine students' attitudes towards accent models, native accents and intelligibility as well as their exposure to English outside the classroom and their views on two accents, namely RP and GA. The full version of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and

qualitative data through a series of closed and open-ended questions. To maximize accessibility and completion rates, the questionnaire was structured to take approximately 10 minutes and optimized for mobile devices, with participants instructed to hold their phones in landscape mode to ensure all answer options were visible.

The questionnaire comprised four sections: introductory page, demographic data, “my pronunciation in English” and “English in my free time”. The first part provided essential information regarding the study’s objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and data confidentiality, explicitly stating that names would only be used to match questionnaires with speech recordings and would be anonymised for analysis. The second section collected demographic and linguistic background data. Participants were asked to provide their full name, age, and language(s) spoken at home.

The third section started with a question regarding their self-reported accent awareness, namely if they think that they can distinguish between American and British English. Participant self-assessment for this item was collected on a 4-point Likert scale from (1) No, not at all to (4) Yes, easily. This question served two purposes: to explore whether confidence concerning accent awareness may influence stated pronunciation goals, and to allow for comparison with a check question that appeared later in the questionnaire. Further, this section included items on accent self-perception, pronunciation goals as well as native-speaker ideals and intelligibility to answer the first research question concerning the characterisation of the students’ own accent. For the first question, participants selected the option that best described their current English accent (*more American, more British, more Austrian, I do not know or Other*) and for the second item they had to choose how happy they were with their current accent on a Likert scale from (1) Not happy at all to (4) Very happy. Here, a 4-point- Likert scale was used to ensure that the students could not select a middle option but choose an answer that points into one distinct direction, either positive or negative. After answering the questions about their own accent, participants indicated their primary pronunciation goal (*to sound like a native speaker of British English, to sound like a native speaker of American English, to be understood or I do not know*). Attitudes toward native-like accent versus intelligibility were further explored by using statements which students had to rate on a 4-point Likert scale, from (1) Strongly disagree to (2) Disagree to (3) Agree to (4) Strongly agree. Again, they were not provided with a middle option to choose for the same purpose as stated above.

The fourth and most extensive section examined participants' EE exposure and use, which examined active and passive EE activities to answer research question two about what role students believe different types of EE activities play in shaping their pronunciation:

Active and interactive use: Learners rated the frequency of the EE activities on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (2) Rarely to (3) Occasionally to (4) Sometimes to (5) Often to (6) Very often to (7) Always of their active English use, including writing text messages and social media posts, playing digital games that require writing or speaking, speaking to others on social media and creating videos that require speaking in English.

Passive and receptive use: Participants rated the frequency of their receptive exposure to English, including listening to songs and podcasts, watching long- and short-form videos (e.g., YouTube, TikTok), films, and series and reading English content on social media and in text messages using the same 7-point Likert scale described above.

This particular 7-point Likert scale was used as it follows recommendations from Sundqvist and Uztosun's (2024, pp. 1643–1644) study, who noted that offering several frequency options helps distinguish between participants more effectively, as answers clustered at the low and high extremes are more likely to be avoided when using scales with more steps.

Moreover, this section also included questions about accent exposure in EE. Participants firstly identified the English accent they most frequently encounter in EE activities (*American English, British English, Both British and American English, I do not know*) and secondly indicated how often they try to imitate the English accent they hear on social media (e.g., series, films, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) or movies or shows on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (2) Rarely to (3) Occasionally to (4) Sometimes to (5) Often to (6) Very often to (7) Always. Lastly, to capture more personalized qualitative data, students were asked to name a specific social media star, influencer, or celebrity whose English accent they really like and, subsequently, to categorize the type of accent that person speaks from a predefined list (*American English, British English, Other or I do not know*). This question served as the check-question, mentioned above, to review whether students can really distinguish between

accents. Further, these last two items about the social media start allowed investigation of potential models for accent acquisition and personal preferences.

4.4.2 Reading aloud task

To answer research question three, concerning the presence of typical GA or RP features, as well as complement the self-reported data from the questionnaires, students' pronunciation was analysed through a recorded reading task. Participants were asked to read aloud a short narrative text, titled "The Mystery of the Old Radio" (see Figure 1 & Appendix B). This 183-word passage was specifically generated using ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) to create a phonologically targeted instrument and was subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure a controlled distribution of selected key features.

Figure 1. *Full read-aloud task for the recording*

The Mystery of the Old Radio

One rainy Thursday, Tom discovered an old radio in his grandmother's attic. It was dusty, but he could still read the label: "*Made in America, 1920.*" Excited, he glanced at it and wiped it clean and plugged it in. To his surprise, it crackled to life!

A man announced: "*Welcome to Mystery Hour!*" Then, eerie music played. Tom listened closely as the host described a hidden treasure buried close to the river. The directions were vague, but Tom decided to investigate.

The next day, Tom invited his better half, Danny, to join him. They packed a map, a flashlight and some water. Close to the riverbank, they spotted an old tree with a carving: "*Turn right after twenty steps.*" Following the clue, they dug under a big rock and found a metal box. Inside was a note: "*The real treasure is the adventure.*" Disappointed but amused, they laughed and headed home.

Later that night, Tom turned the radio on again, but this time, it only played static. Had it all been a strange coincidence? Was the radio truly magical? He decided to keep it...just in case.

The text was designed to be engaging while providing a manageable and phonetically informative source for pronunciation assessment. Its primary purpose was to include specific segmental features relevant to accent analysis. These features were critical

for distinguishing the two accents examined in the study. The decision to engineer the text with an equal number of these features was a methodological necessity, as in naturally occurring texts, the frequency of such segmental features would not be identical (Roberts, 2020, p. 189). This controlled approach ensures that the analysis of each feature is based on a comparable and balanced set of data.

Table 2. *Frequency of target segmental features in the reading passage*

Segmental feature	Examples from text	Number of tokens
postvocalic /r/	river, discovered, turned	14
flapping/tapping	excited, static, later	14

To be more precise, the passage was systematically crafted to contain exactly 14 occurrences of postvocalic /r/ (e.g., river, treasure). Furthermore, it was edited to provide precisely 14 potential tokens for flapping/tapping of /t/ in intervocalic positions (e.g., metal, water). This is illustrated in Table 2. These two specific segmental features were selected due to their well-established role as key differentiators between GA and RP, as mentioned in chapter 2.1. The first feature, postvocalic /r/, embodies the fundamental rhoticity contrast: GA is rhotic, meaning speakers pronounce /r/ in all positions, whereas RP is non-rhotic, pronouncing /r/ only when followed by a vowel (Raihan & Deterding, 2017, p. 207). This is widely considered one of the most salient phonetic distinctions between the two accents. The second feature, flapping, involves the pronunciation of intervocalic /t/ and /d/ as a voiced alveolar tap [ɾ]. This process is a hallmark of North American English (Rogerson-Revell, 2017, p. 107), while in RP, these sounds are typically maintained as distinct alveolar stops, respectively. Together, these features were chosen since they offer clear, observable, and quantifiable evidence of a speaker's orientation towards either a British or an American accent. Indeed, the same variables have been widely employed in previous research on pronunciation and accent orientation (Roberts, 2020, 189; Lenhard & Meer, 2025, p. 3).

Although the text naturally included opportunities to observe suprasegmental features, such as narrative intonation and sentence stress, its sole function was to serve a standardised tool for consistent analysis of the targeted segmental phenomena. As already mentioned, the deliberate focus on segmental features was motivated by their particular effectiveness in distinguishing between accents (Rogerson-Revell, 2017, p.

94). Unlike suprasegmental patterns, which can be more variable and context-dependent, specific segmental features such as postvocalic /r/ and intervocalic flapping serve as robust categorical markers of accent orientation. This methodological choice also reflected a broader consideration in pronunciation research: the trade-off between experimental control and ecological validity. Highly controlled tasks, such as the reading passage employed here, guarantee comparable speech material from all speakers, a prerequisite for direct cross-speaker comparisons, while uncontrolled tasks, like spontaneous narratives, may offer greater representativeness of natural speech, but they introduce variability that can obscure systematic comparisons (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 24). Therefore, the controlled task was chosen for the current thesis.

Collectively, the questionnaire and the audio recordings from the reading task offered complementary insights, capturing both students' self-perceptions and attitudes towards English accents and their actual pronunciation performance.

4.4.3 Anonymisation

To ensure participant confidentiality and compliance with data protection regulations, clear anonymisation procedures were implemented for both the questionnaire and the audio recordings. During the data collection, all recordings were made by the researcher using a personal device to not only guarantee consistent sound quality but also to minimize the risk of data theft, as no files were transferred to or stored on external or unsecured devices. After each recording, each participant was instructed to save their recording under their full name, which enabled accurate matching between the recording and the corresponding questionnaire response during the analysis. This matching process was possible because participants also provided their full name on the questionnaire, allowing for precise linkage between the two datasets prior to anonymisation. After all data had been collected, each recording was assigned an anonymised participant code (e.g., St1, St2), and a separate code key was created to maintain the link between identifiers and anonymised data. Once all recordings had been matched and verified, the original files containing names were permanently deleted. Consequently, all data used for analyses were fully anonymised, ensuring that participants could not be personally identified.

4.5 Data analysis

4.5.1 Questionnaire

As the questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to analyse the collected data. The open-ended question regarding students' home language(s) was analysed using thematic analysis, in which similar or in this case identical answers are reassembled to represent emergent themes across participants answers (Dewaele, 2018, p. 604). This analysis, thus, involved first identifying recurring answers and then examining responses that deviated from these patterns to capture the full range of linguistic backgrounds represented in the sample.

For the item in which participants identified the accent of their social media role model, only responses that included both the name of a social media star and the perceived accent were included in the analysis. These were first documented according to the accent attributed by the participant and subsequently verified for accuracy by me through listening to videos or interviews featuring the named individual. Closed-ended items were analysed quantitatively to identify trends, distributions, and potential relationships within the participant group. The analysis was conducted using Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) (JASP Team, 2019), a statistical software, to ensure accuracy.

Descriptive statistics were applied to obtain a comprehensive overview of the responses. Measures such as frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations were calculated for key variables. This included summarising students' self-reported accent preferences, their frequency of exposure and engagement with EE activities and their level of agreement with attitudinal statements regarding pronunciation learning goals. These descriptive results served to characterise the sample and identify general patterns in attitudes and reported behaviours.

4.5.2 Audio data

The audio recordings were analysed using a structured auditory-phonetic procedure, a well-established method grounded in the principle that phonetic analysis begins with listeners making systematic judgements of sameness and difference (Pilch, 1978, p. 148). This approach, thus, involves listeners systematically identifying and coding specific pronunciation features in speech samples based on phonological criteria.

This method was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, auditory analysis remains a widely accepted approach in pronunciation research, particularly for investigating segmental features, as it allows for nuanced judgements that cannot be captured through acoustic measures alone (Munro & Derwing, 2015, p. 14). Secondly, phonological feature-based analysis enables sub-phonemic examination at the feature level, providing a structured way for analysing the types of pronunciation patterns learners produce (Arora et al., 2018, p. 99). This precision is particularly relevant when comparing productions across two accent varieties, where subtle differences in feature realisation must be carefully distinguished. Thirdly, auditory methods allow researchers to account for atypical productions that may not fit neatly into pre-defined acoustic categories (Munro, 2017, p. 417). While acoustic analysis, using tools such as Praat, can offer objective measurements of duration, intensity, and pitch (Lewis & Wichmann, 2015, p. 143), auditory evaluation remains valuable for capturing the perceptual reality of pronunciation features as they are experienced by listeners.

To further justify the methodological choices in developing the rating scale, it is necessary to consider central challenges in pronunciation assessment research. Structured rating scales, in which trained evaluators judge speech samples according to predetermined criteria, are a standard tool in human-rated pronunciation assessment (Isaacs & Thomson, 2013, p. 136). Yet researchers have consistently identified concerns regarding the reliability, validity, and practical utility of such instruments. Common criticisms include the presence of ambiguous descriptors, overlapping construct definitions, and inadequate differentiation between proficiency levels (Harding, 2017; Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2017; Zhong, 2019). Even established frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have been questioned for fostering inconsistent judgements, attributed to imprecise descriptors and insufficient direction for evaluating pronunciation specifically (Harding, 2017, pp. 20–22). Consequently, the current study required a rating scale with precise and clear criteria. The analysis was, thus, guided by an analytic rating grid focusing on target phonological variables, which was designed in Excel (Microsoft Corporation, 2024) and with the help of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) (see Table 3 & Appendix C).

Table 3. *Blank analytic rating grid for the segmental feature “flapping”*

Flapping				
word	Pronounced as “d” (GA)	Pronounced as “t” (RP)	Omitted	Other
attic				
excited				
at it				
it in				
invited				
better				
water				
spotted				
twenty				
metal				
later				
it only				
static				
had it				
<i>Total</i>				
<i>Percentages</i>				

Each student recording was analysed using the structured grid, designed to track the production of two distinct features: rhotic /r/ and flapping. Firstly, each lexical item from the reading passage was analysed token by token. For each feature, individual tokens were examined and coded into one of the four categories: rhotic /r/ or flapped (d), non-rhotic or not flapped (t), word or sound left out (token was omitted entirely) and other (distorted sound or alternative pronunciation). In cases where pronunciation deviated from both GA and RP, the two additional categories (word or sound left out and other) were available to capture atypical productions. This coding system allowed for systematic tracking across all recordings.

Following the coding phase, the occurrences of GA features were tallied and converted into percentage scores. Firstly, for rhotic /r/ and flapping separately and then added together again for each participant to arrive at a total score. A threshold was then applied: students who produced GA features in more than 50% of their tokens were categorised as GA-oriented, while those scoring below 50% were categorised as RP-oriented. Those who scored exactly 50% were categorised as being both GA- and RP-oriented or mixed/hybrid. In addition to individual classifications, mean scores were calculated for each feature across the entire group of participants. This provided an overall picture of how frequently rhotic /r/ and flapping occurred in the sample.

Given that only one rater was involved in the analysis, a high degree of intra-rater consistency and responsibility was necessary to ensure reliability and objectivity throughout the evaluation process. To achieve this, a subset of recordings was analysed twice by the researcher, with the second analysis conducted one week after the first and in a randomized order. In cases where differences were noted between the two evaluations, the recordings were reviewed again to reach a final, informed decision. This repeated and reflective procedure, together with the use of a clearly structured analysis grid and predefined rating criteria, helped minimise subjective interpretation and enhance the overall reliability of the assessment (Grabowski & Oh, 2018, pp. 551–552).

4.5.3 Relationship between questionnaire and recordings

In order to answer research question four, namely identifying emerging patterns between perceived accent and performed pronunciation, the analysis of the questionnaire and the recordings was synthesised in the following manner:

Consistent with the scope of the current study, the analysis of the potential relationship between questionnaire responses and the recordings focused specifically on the two accent varieties RP and GA. As outlined in chapter 3, these two accents were selected not only because they represent the most prominent standard varieties in EFL teaching and media exposure, but also because they are central to current pronunciation research. Thus, only students who identified their current accent as either *more American* or *more British* were included in the initial comparative analysis. This yielded 14 students who described their current accent as *more American* and one student who described their current accent as *more British*.

For the overall comparison, the production percentages which determined whether students were more GA-oriented or RP-oriented, were compared with the responses to the questionnaire item “How would you describe your accent at the moment?”. This comparison was then noted: Where a student’s self-perceived accent matched their production, this was marked as “Yes”; where it did not match this was marked as “No”. Responses where students did not select an accent option included in the feature analysis, namely *I do not know*, *other* or *more Austrian*, were not categorised in this way but were recorded according to the option selected and, thus, left out of this particular comparison.

Cases were marked for potential deeper qualitative analysis if they displayed a complete mismatch between perception and production data. From these marked cases, one student who chose *more American* and one student who selected *more British* were chosen for this analysis. These cases were selected as they stood out from the overall pattern in the data, allowing for a more nuanced perspective on learner performances. For these cases, questionnaire responses were examined in more detail, particularly items relating to exposure to EE, to determine whether any possible inferences could be drawn.

5. Results

The following chapter presents the results, addressing students' perceptions of English accent models, their engagement with English outside the classroom, and the extent to which their pronunciation reflects features of RP and GA. The findings are organised into four main sections. First, students' attitudes towards accent models, their self-described accent, and their pronunciation goals are summarised. Second, patterns of EE exposure are reported, distinguishing between passive exposure and active forms of engagement and including students' references to social media figures as potential role models. Third, the analysis of recorded pronunciation data is presented, focusing on the two segmental features selected for this study. Lastly, participants' self-reported accent orientations are compared with their recorded pronunciation patterns and individual cases are examined in more detail.

5.1 Perceptions of accents and accent models

The first research question intended to investigate how learners characterize their own English accent and to explore their attitudes towards intelligibility and native-like accents when it comes to the main goal for pronunciation learning.

To examine how the learners describe their own accent the following two items were utilized:

1. How would you describe your English accent at the moment?

For this question the following answer options were given: *more American, more British, more Austrian, Other, I do not know*

2. How happy are you with your English accent at the moment?

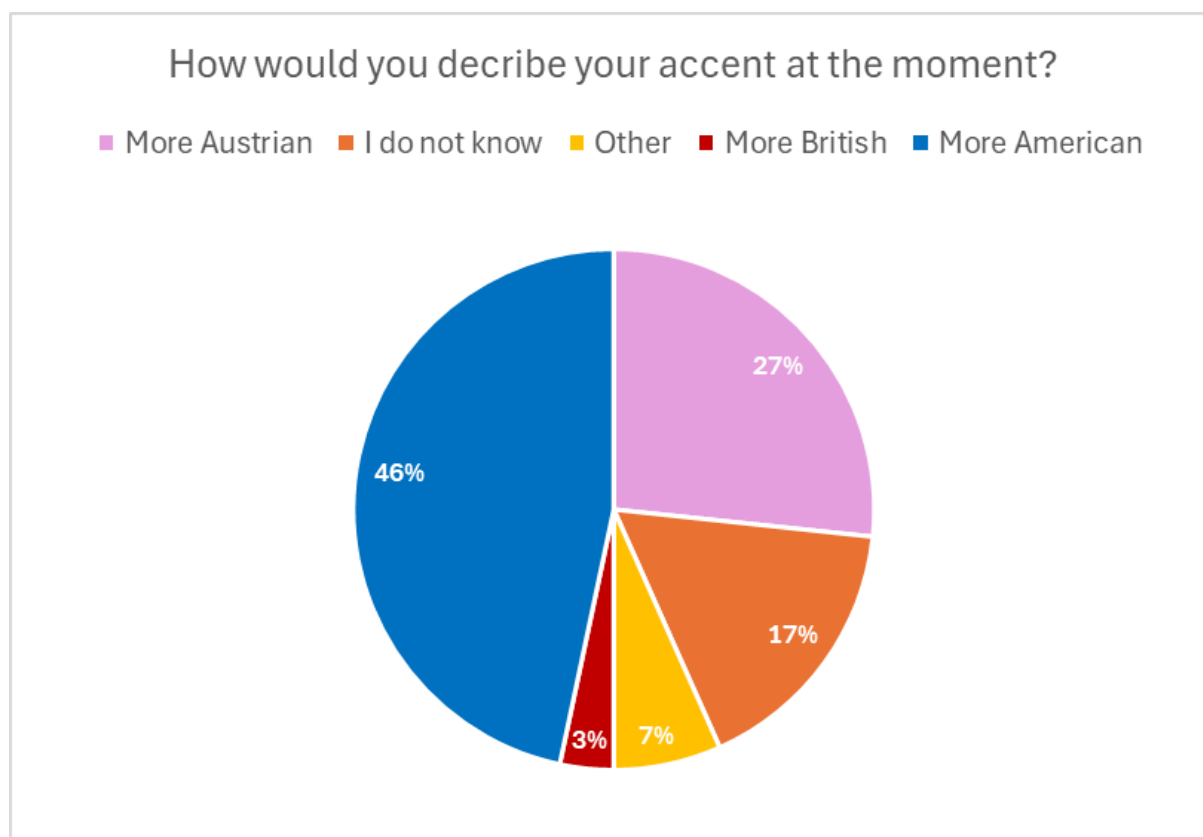
Participants answered this question by using a 4-point Likert scale from (1) Not happy at all to (4) Very happy.

To investigate the students' attitudes towards native-like accents and intelligibility as pronunciation goals, firstly, the following four statements concerning native-like accent and intelligibility on a scale from (1) Strongly disagree to (4) Strongly agree:

- a) Achieving a native-like accent is an important sign of strong English-speaking skills.
- b) Clear and understandable pronunciation matters more than sounding like a native speaker.
- c) An English accent that sounds like a native speaker's is the ideal goal for learners.
- d) The most important goal of pronunciation is to be easily understood by others.

Secondly, students were directly asked what their main pronunciation goal is ("What is your main aim/goal for pronunciation learning?") and were provided with these answer options: *to be understood*, *to sound like a native speaker of American English*, *to sound like a native speaker of British English* or *I do not know*.

Figure 2. Self-reported current accent of the participants

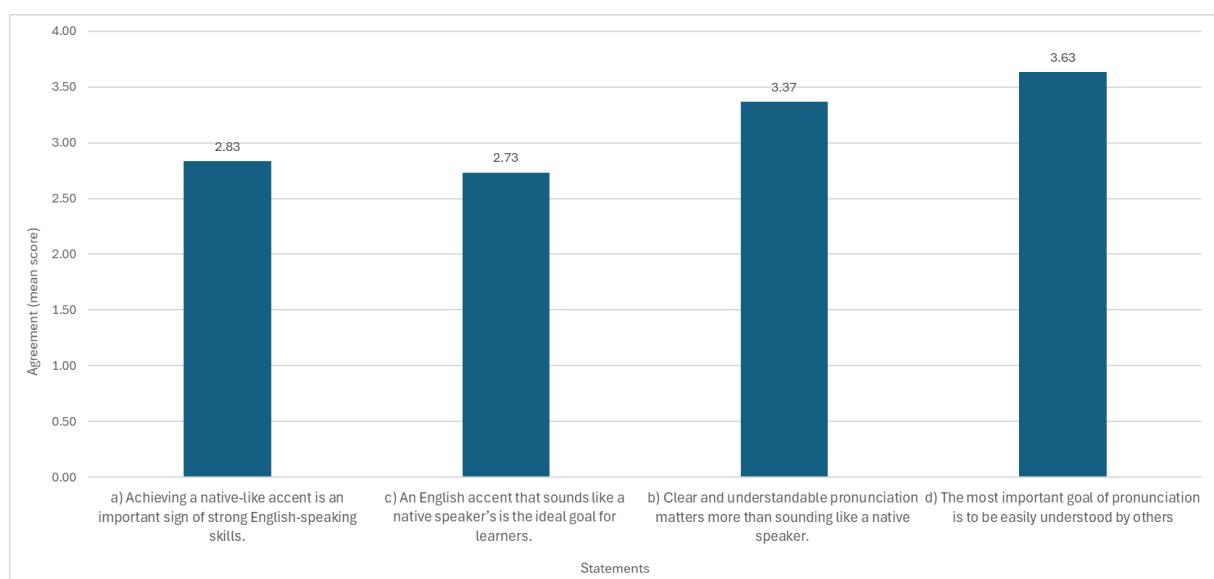


As Figure 2 shows, students (N = 30) expressed a broad range of perceptions regarding their own English accents. When asked to characterise their accent, nearly half of the learners (46%, n = 14) identified as *more American*. 27% (n = 8) perceived their accent as *more Austrian*, 17% (n = 5) were unsure, 7% (n = 2) offered alternative descriptions, and only one participant (3%) reported sounding *more British*.

Students also rated how satisfied they were with their accent, resulting in a relatively high mean score of 3.73 on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) Not happy at all to (4) Very happy, suggesting overall positive self-evaluations.

In addition, students completed four attitude statements related to native-like accents and intelligibility on a Likert scale from (1) Strongly disagree to (4) Strongly agree.

Figure 3. Degree of agreement with statements about the native-like accent and intelligibility



Note. Agreement was assessed on a 4-point Likert scale from (1) Strongly disagree to (4) Strongly agree

Figure 3 illustrates that mean scores showed limited support for a native-like accent. Agreement with the idea that a native-like accent is a sign of strong English skills (a) was moderate (M = 2.83), and the statement about a native accent being the ideal goal (c) received a slightly lower mean of 2.73. In contrast, intelligibility-focused items received substantially higher agreement. Students strongly supported the view that clear and understandable pronunciation is more important than sounding native-like (b) (M = 3.37) and that the most important goal of pronunciation is to be easily understood (d) (M = 3.63).

To examine the findings more closely and understand their motivation, students were asked directly about their primary pronunciation goal.

Figure 4. *Participants' self-reported main pronunciation goal*



Figure 4 clearly shows that many learners indicated that their main priority was to be understood (36%, $n = 11$). Nevertheless, almost half of the learners expressed a preference for aligning with a specific accent model: 47% ($n = 14$) of students reported aiming for a GA accent as their ideal, while only 10% ($n = 3$) preferred a native RP accent. 7% ($n = 2$) were unsure what their main goal is when it comes to pronunciation learning.

Overall, the findings reveal a clear orientation toward GA, combined with a strong emphasis on intelligibility and communicative success. Students generally feel satisfied with their accent, demonstrate moderate awareness of accent difference in media and perceive having a native-like accent as a higher goal than being understood.

5.2 Reported exposure to EE

The second research question sought to capture the student's exposure and engagement with passive as well as active EE activities and their perceived influence of various EE activities on their English pronunciation.

To investigate passive exposure the following items were used:

1. I listen to English songs.
2. I listen to English podcasts.
3. I watch longer videos in English (e.g. YouTube).
4. I watch English films, series or documentaries.
5. I watch shorter videos in English (e.g. TikTok's or Reels).
6. I read English content (e.g. captions) on social media.
7. I read text messages (e.g. WhatsApp) in English.

Active engagement was examined employing the following items:

1. I write text messages (e.g. WhatsApp) in English.
2. I write social media posts (e.g. captions under pictures) in English.
3. I play digital games that require writing in English.
4. I speak to other people in English on social media (e.g. voice messages).
5. I play digital games that require speaking in English.
6. I create videos (e.g. TikToks) for social media that require speaking in English.

The students rated these items on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (7) Always.

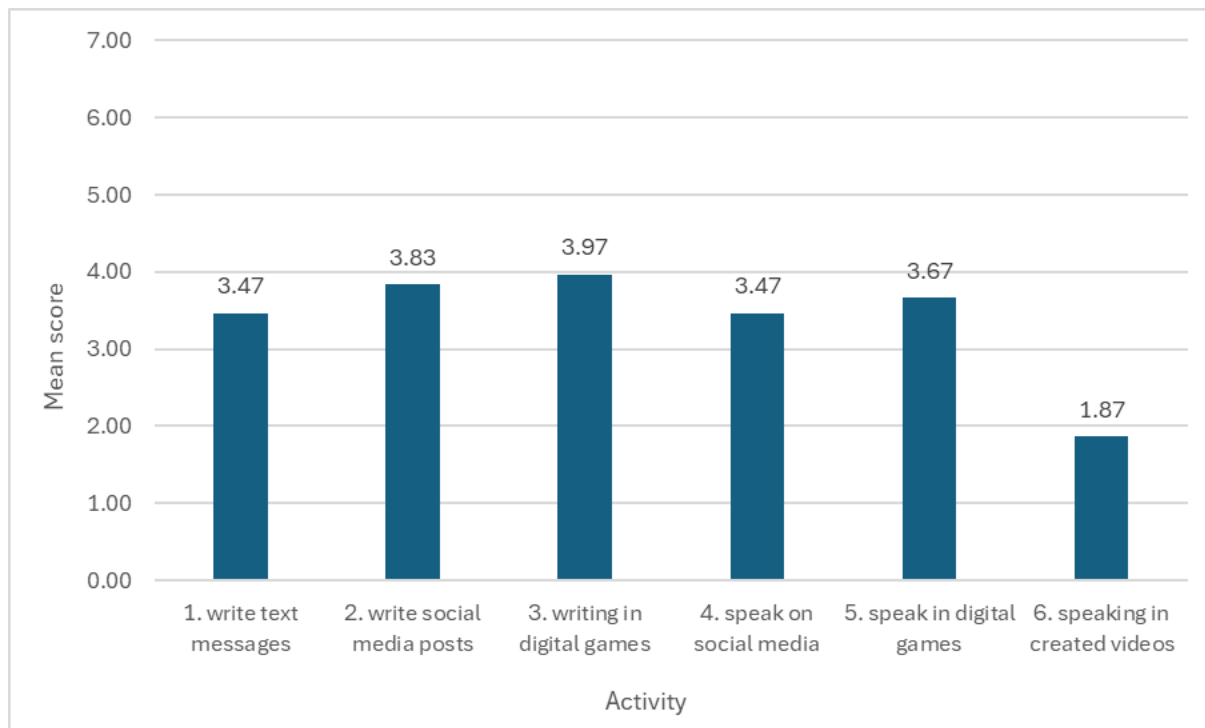
To examine the students' perceived influence of various EE activities on their English pronunciation, the following items were used:

1. Which English accent do you hear most often outside of school (e.g., on social media, YouTube or in films, music, games)?
For this question the following answer options were given: *American English*, *British English*, *Both American and British English* or *I do not know*

2. I try to imitate the English accent I hear on social media (e.g., series, films, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) or movies or shows.
Participants answered this question by using a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (7) Always.

All in all, the data shows that students reported high levels of both exposure to as well as engagement with a wide range of EE activities.

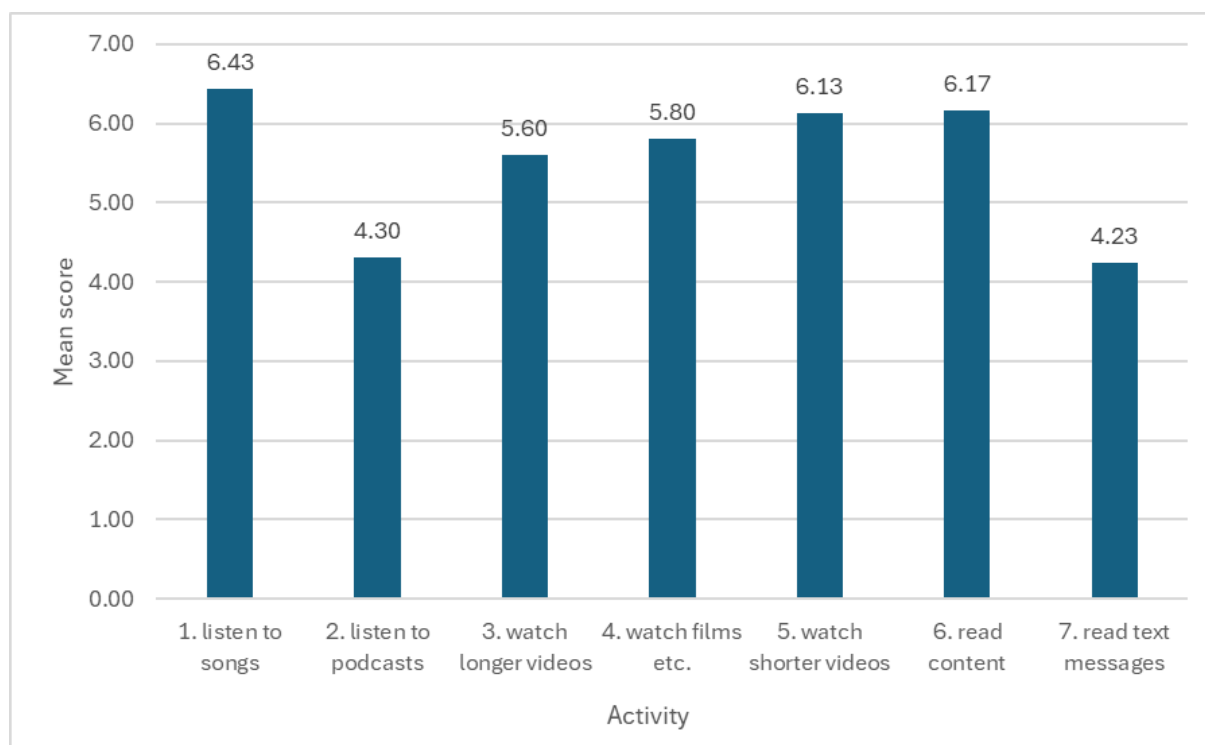
Figure 5. *Participants' self-reported engagement with active EE activities*



Note. Engagement was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (7) Always

Regarding active engagement, Figure 5 shows that writing in digital contexts was particularly frequent. Mean scores indicate that learners often wrote in digital games ($M = 3.97$), followed closely by social media posts ($M = 3.83$) and text messages ($M = 3.47$). Speaking activities were less common overall, with learners reporting occasional speaking in digital games ($M = 3.67$) and speaking on social media ($M = 3.47$). Speaking in self-created videos was the least frequent form of active EE, with a mean score of 1.87.

Figure 6. *Participants' self-reported exposure to passive EE activities*

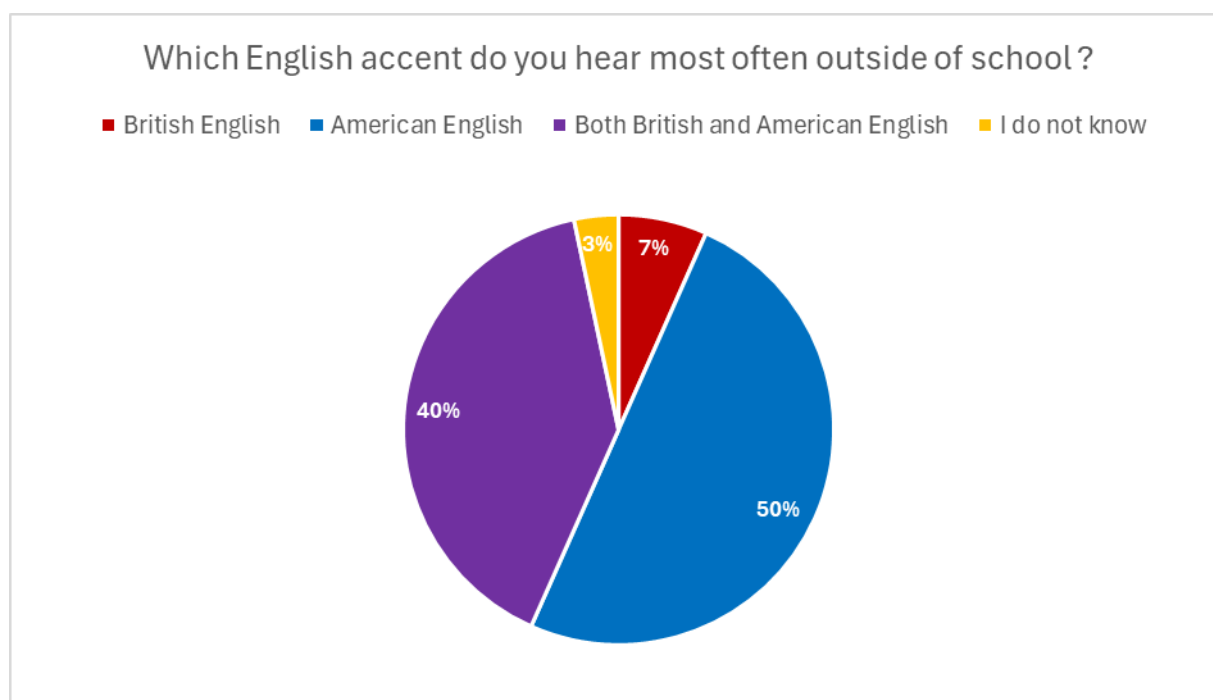


Note. Exposure was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (7) Always

As seen above (Figure 6), students reported consistently higher exposure to passive EE activities. Listening to songs emerged as the most frequent activity ($M = 6.43$), followed by reading online content ($M = 6.17$), watching shorter videos ($M = 6.13$), watching films or series ($M = 5.80$), and watching longer videos ($M = 5.60$). Listening to podcasts ($M = 4.30$) and reading text messages ($M = 4.23$) were reported less frequently but still contributed to students' passive exposure to English.

To further explore the types of EE exposure connected to the two investigated accents, the participants were asked which accent they were most frequently exposed to when being exposed to or engage in English outside the classroom.

Figure 7. *Participants' self-reported accent exposure outside of school*



As is evident from Figure 7, half of the learners reported that they come across more *American English* ($n = 15$) outside of school. A significant portion, 40% ($n = 12$), reported encountering *both British and American English*. In contrast, only a small minority of learners experienced a predominantly *British English* environment, with just 7% ($n = 2$) identifying it as the accent they hear most often. A further 3% ($n = 1$) of respondents were uncertain which variety they are exposed to most frequently.

A closer examination of the relationship between EE activities and actual pronunciation prompted the question of whether students try to imitate the English accent they hear on social media (e.g., series, films, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram). The mean score of 3.73, on a Likert scale from Never (1) to Always (7), suggests that although exposure to GA-dominant content is pervasive and overt, conscious imitation is not a widespread habit. Learners' phonological uptake from these sources appears to be largely incidental rather than deliberate.

To further explore students' exposure-based accent awareness, participants were asked to name a social media star whose accent they like and to identify which accent that person speaks. 17 out of 30 students answered this open question and gave an answer for the allocation of accent as well.

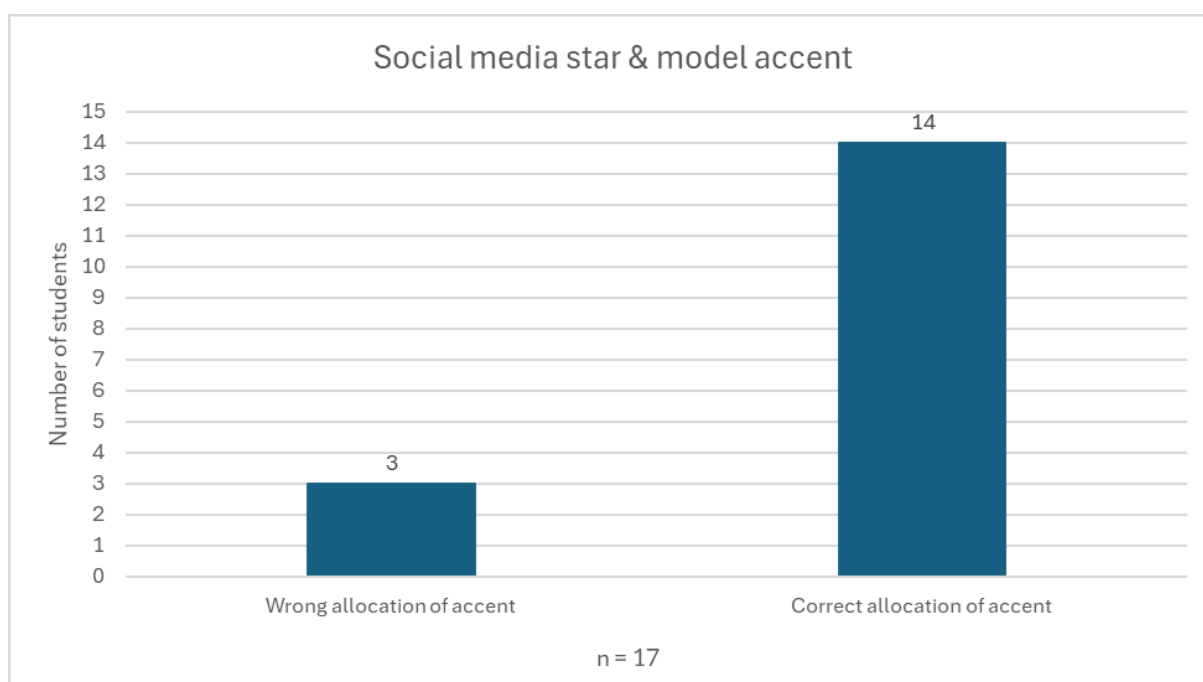
Table 4 shows which social media stars were mentioned by participants, including their accents allocated by students and the social media stars' actual accent. Identification of each social media star's accent was based on a holistic qualitative analysis of speech samples extracted from their video posts or interviews by the researcher.

Table 4. *Social media stars, their accent mentioned by participants and their actual accent*

Social media star	Accent allocated by the student	Actual accent
Kit Harington	British	British
Madelyn Argy	British	British
Paddie the baddy	Other	Scouse
Rick Sanchez	American	American
Mc Gregor	Other	Irish
Roger Federer	American	Swiss German accent
Jared McCain	American	American
Dave	British	British
Matthew McConaughey	American	American
FlightReacts	American	American
EsDeeKid	British	British
Julia Roberts	American	American
Ishowspeed	American	American
Tom Cruise	American	American
David Grey Rehab	British	Irish
Mr Beast	American	American
Millie Bobby Brown	British	British

Further, Figure 8 illustrates how many students correctly identified their social media star's accent and how many misidentified it.

Figure 8. *Participants' accuracy of accent allocation: social media star*



Note. The accent attributed to each social media star was identified through holistic qualitative analysis of their accent in a sample of their video posts or interviews

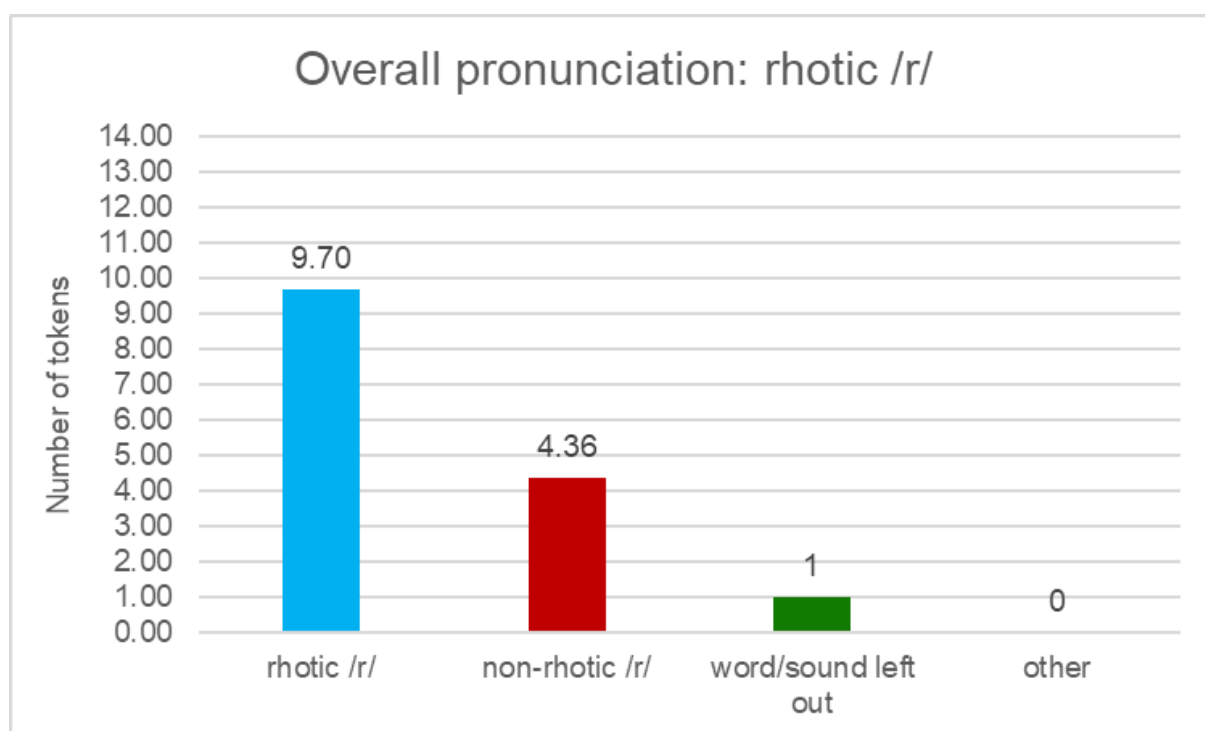
Figure 8 demonstrates clearly that the accuracy of these attributions varied considerably: 14 out of 17 students correctly identified the accent of their chosen media figure, whereas three provided incorrect allocations. This indicates that although many learners can successfully distinguish accents in media contexts, a non-negligible group struggles with accurate categorisation. Notably, of the 17 social media stars selected by participants, 6 have an RP accent, 3 another accent (e.g., Irish), and the remainder of 8 social media stars have a GA accent.

Overall, the data suggests that students' exposure and engagement with English outside the classroom is mostly American English, frequent, varied, and multimodal, with a strong emphasis on listening and reading, and selective engagement in speaking and writing activities. Further, most students can successfully distinguish between American and British English in media contexts. However, while learners are immersed in a GA-dominated media environment and can articulate preferences for it, this alignment does not straightforwardly translate into conscious imitation or uniform productive mastery.

5.3 Auditory analysis of selected pronunciation features

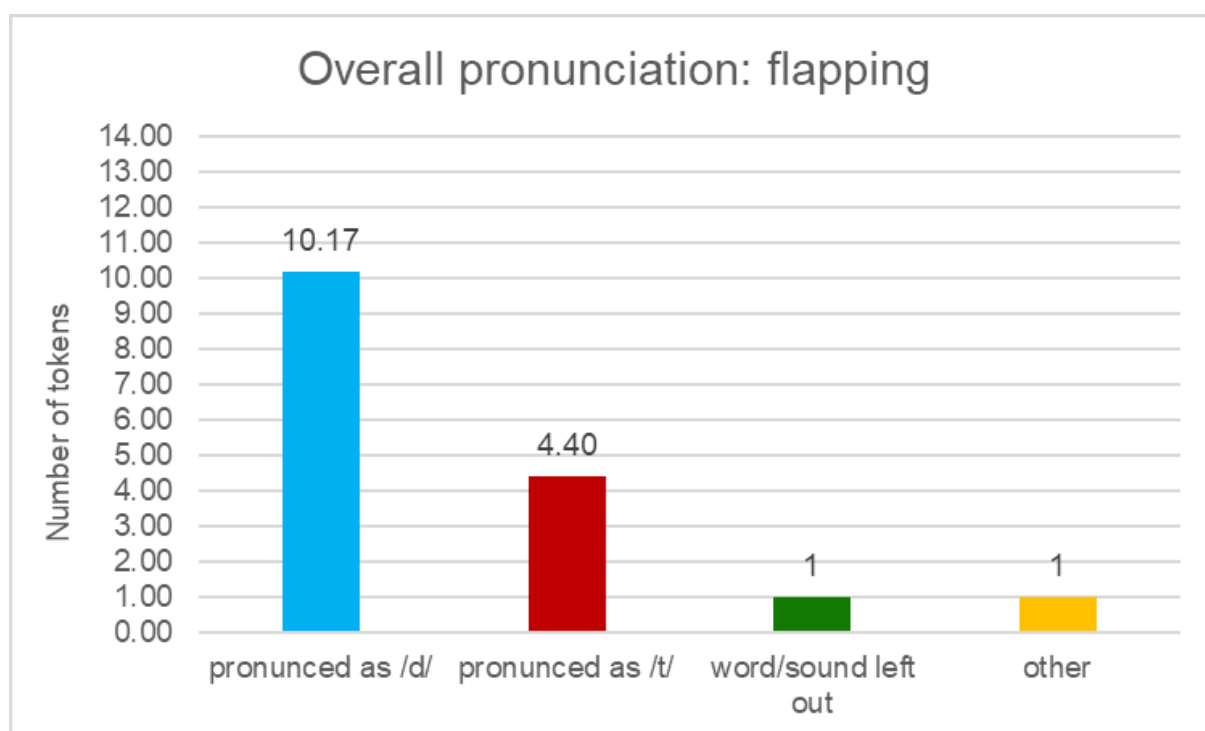
To address the third research question regarding how closely students' pronunciation aligns with characteristic features of GA and RP, two segmental variables were analysed in the recorded reading task. Each participant produced 14 rhotic contexts and 14 flap-eligible contexts, yielding 28 target tokens per speaker. The analysis examined whether each token reflected an RP-consistent realisation (non-rhotic /r/; alveolar /t/), a GA-consistent realisation (postvocalic /r/; alveolar [r]), or a hybrid pronunciation.

Figure 9. Mean scores of the pronunciation of rhotic /r/ in read-aloud task



As demonstrated in Figure 9, students produced a mean of 9.70 rhotic tokens out of 14 possible contexts. In contrast, non-rhotic productions, aligned with RP, occurred on average 4.36 times per student. One additional token per student, on average, was classified as *omitted* (e.g., word left out). No productions fell into the *other* category.

Figure 10. Mean scores of the pronunciation of flapping in read-aloud task



Analysis of the 14 flap-eligible tokens revealed an even stronger tendency toward GA-consistent pronunciation patterns than rhoticity. As can be seen in Figure 10, on average, students produced 10.17 tokens using a voiced alveolar tap. In contrast, the unflapped alveolar stop occurred 4.40 times per student. As with the rhotic /r/ contexts, an average of one token per participant was marked as *omitted* and an additional single token was categorised as *other*, since the sound was substituted with another sound not included in the analysis (the student pronounced the word “attic” like so: [æθɪk]).

Overall, the analysis of the two features indicated that the participants’ speech shows substantial alignment with GA. However, the overall pronunciation can be categorised as mixed, as both GA and RP features co-occurred within and across participants, which is described in more detail in the next chapter.

5.4 Questionnaires versus recordings

To assess research question four, concerning the congruence between students’ self-perceived accents and their actual performance, participants’ questionnaire responses regarding their accent orientation were compared with their recorded speech. It should be highlighted that participants reported a moderate self-perceived ability to distinguish between American and British English ($M = 3.47$) on a 4-point Likert scale.

For the comparison of the questionnaire responses and the recordings, each learner was assigned an accent type based on the overall percentages of both features. Table 5 illustrates how many students out of all the participants exhibited a predominantly GA accent (over 50%), a predominantly RP accent (under 50%), or a mixed/hybrid accent pattern (exactly 50%).

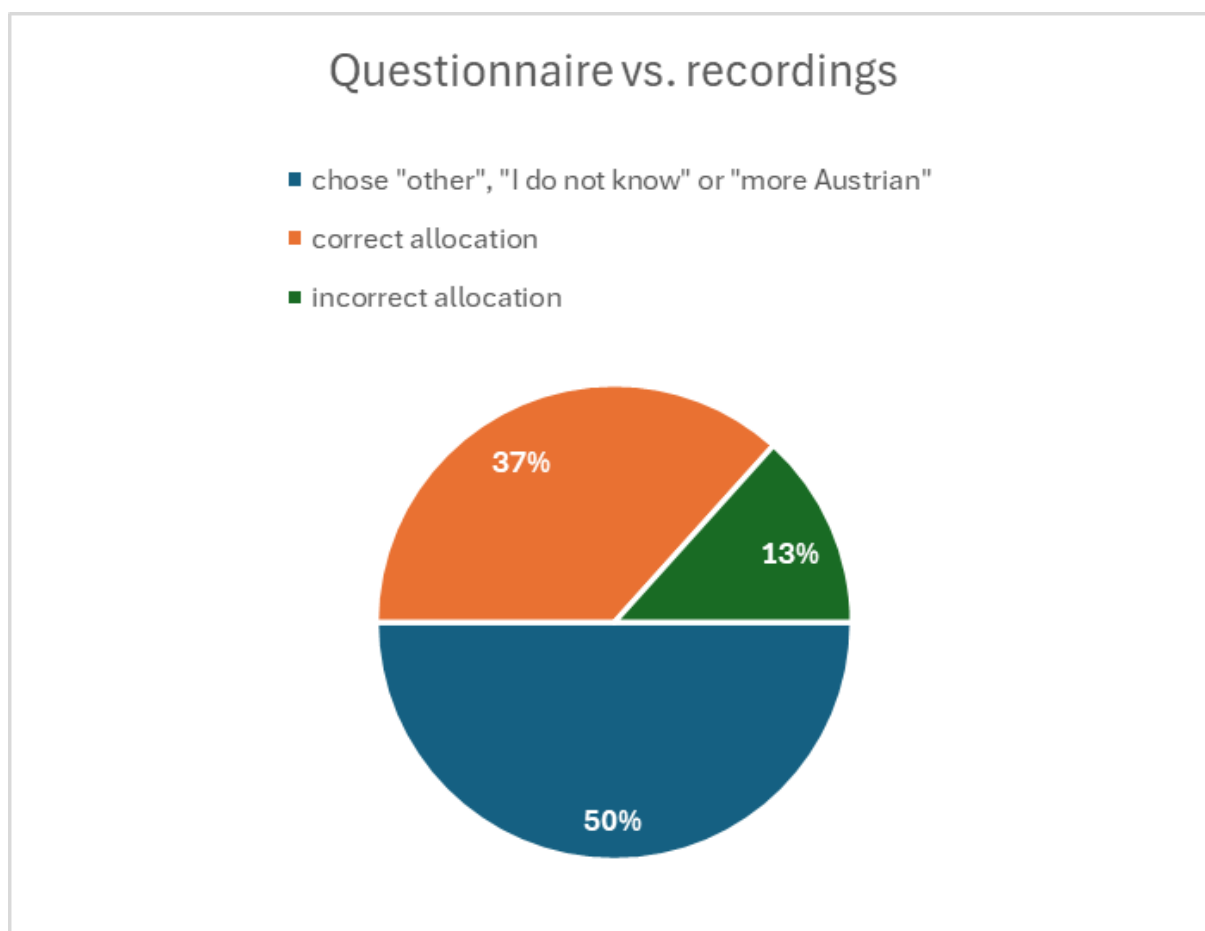
Table 5. *Distribution of accent types based on overall percentages of the two features (postvocalic /r/ and alveolar tap [ɾ])*

Accent type	Number of students
GA-oriented	25
RP-oriented	3
Mixed/Hybrid accent	2

As Table 5 clearly shows, only three students were categorised as more RP-oriented, based on their recordings, and two produced an equal share of GA and RP features (50%), the vast majority of participants (n = 25) demonstrated an orientation towards GA. However, it should be emphasised that a cut-off threshold was required for this categorisation, and the percentages shown reflect overall feature use rather than consistent accent orientation across variables. In fact, the two features remained considerably mixed for most learners, with only a few students exhibiting clearly GA-oriented percentages above 80%. This underlying mixed accent pattern will become more evident in the individual analysis presented later in this section.

As explained in section 4.5.3, for the initial comparison between questionnaire responses and recordings, only those students who identified as either *more American* or *more British* were included, as the study centred on these two model accents. The remaining participants, who described their accent as *more Austrian* or selected *I do not know* or *other*, were not included in this comparison of questionnaire and recordings data.

Figure 11. *Comparison between accent perception and actual pronunciation*



After applying the eligibility criteria, 15 participants (50% of the total sample size) were included in this analysis (see Figure 11). It should be noted that this categorisation was based exclusively on the two analysed features: postvocalic /r/ and flapping. Following a 50% cut-off threshold, productions exceeding 50% GA-consistent features were categorised as mostly GA and every score under 50% was categorised as mostly RP. 37% ($n = 11$) were correctly allocated, meaning that their self-reported accent category matched the predominant accent features (postvocalic /r/ and alveolar tap [ɾ]) observed in their recordings. In contrast, a minority of 13% ($n = 4$) were incorrectly allocated, as their self-described accent did not align with the accent features most frequently produced in their reading task.

To provide a more nuanced understanding of individual performances and further illustrate the variation of self-perception and performance various noteworthy cases are described in the following section. These particular students, whom we will call Alex and Maya, have been given pseudonyms for anonymity. They were selected for

closer examination because they stood out as striking cases where the students' self-perception of their accent did not match their recorded performance, as clarified in section 4.5.3. While the previous analysis was mostly concerned with Austrian EFL learners as a group, the following qualitative analysis will therefore focus on individual cases. This appears valuable since accent and self-awareness are highly personal and subjective processes, shaped by unique pattern of exposure, identity and learning experience (Moyer, 2013, p. 12).

The first participant, Alex, self-identified as *more British* when asked to describe their current accent. Notably, they were the only participant who selected British as their sole accent orientation, which made this particularly striking. At home, they reported German and Russian as their spoken languages. On the EE section of the questionnaire, they reported low active but high passive EE activities, and their self-reported accent exposure outside school was both British and American. Their main pronunciation goal was simply *to be understood*.

Despite this British self-identification, Alex's recorded production was overwhelmingly GA-oriented. Specifically, they exhibited 89.29% GA-consistent features overall, with 100% of eligible contexts produced using the GA-typical alveolar tap [ɾ] and 78.57% featuring rhotic /r/, both high percentages aligning with GA norms. When asked to name a social media figure whose accent they like, they selected Julia Roberts, an American actress who naturally speaks with a GA accent and correctly identified her accent as American.

Taken together, this evidence appears to illustrate a clear mismatch between self-perception and actual production: Alex's pronunciation is overwhelmingly GA-oriented despite their self-identification as *more British*.

The second participant, Maya, self-identified as *more American* when asked to describe their accent at the moment. At home, they reported Serbian, German, and English as their spoken languages. On the EE section of the questionnaire, they reported very high passive exposure (always selecting (7) Always on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) Never to (7) Always) but moderate active EE activities. Their self-reported accent exposure outside school was both British and American. Like Alex, Maya's main pronunciation goal was *to be understood*. When asked to name a social media figure whose accent they like, they did not name anyone.

Despite this American self-identification, Maya's recorded production was mixed but leant predominantly RP-oriented. Specifically, they exhibited the GA-typical alveolar tap [ɾ] in only 14.29% of eligible contexts, a very low rate that aligns more closely with RP-norms. However, they showed a relatively high rate of postvocalic /r/ (78.57%), which is typically associated with GA. This apparent contradiction, high rhoticity alongside very low flapping, resulted in an overall RP-leaning realisation when both features were considered together (46.43%). Consequently, their allocation relative to their self-identification was incorrect.

Taken together, this evidence seems to illustrate a mismatch between self-perception and actual production, as Maya self-identified as more American yet produced predominantly RP-oriented features, leading to an incorrect allocation

All in all, these two cases exemplify how varying patterns of EE exposure may contribute to the nuanced and sometimes inconsistent phonetic profiles observed in the recordings, which are further examined in the following discussion chapter.

Overall, these findings paint a detailed portrait of Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners' attitudes, exposure and production patterns. The results reveal a pronounced orientation towards GA in both preference and, to a lesser extent, in actual production, tempered by an emphasis on primarily nativelikeness but also intelligibility. While the quantitative data highlights trends across the group, the analysis of individual cases underscores the complex and highly personal nature of accent development, where self-perception, media-consumption, and spoken performance do not always converge. This divergence sets the stage for a deeper examination of factors at play. The following discussion chapter will therefore interpret these results by considering how patterns of EE exposure, attitudinal priorities and pedagogical context may collectively shape the learners' accent identities and the relationship between the accents they encounter, the accents they aim for, and their actual production.

6. Discussion

The present study set out to investigate how Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners perceive two prominent accent models, namely RP and GA, their production of a selected number of segmental features commonly associated with RP and GA, and how these orientations might relate to their EE exposure. The discussion that follows

situates the key findings within the broader research landscape on pronunciation learning, accent attitudes, and the role of input in shaping EFL phonological development. This chapter, therefore, aims to interpret the results' implications, examine how they confirm or challenge existing assumptions, and highlight the interplay between instructional models and learners' real-world linguistic environments. In doing so, it also addresses the central tension identified throughout the literature review: the coexistence of an RP-oriented school context and an increasingly GA-dominated exposure outside the classroom. This tension is further complicated by the broader pedagogical tension between prioritising intelligibility and adhering to native speaker norms. The chapter proceeds by discussing the findings in relation to learners' accent attitudes, the influence of EE on accent preferences and production, and the extent to which self-perception corresponds with actual phonetic behaviour, before outlining pedagogical implications, limitations, and directions for further research.

6.1 The role of native-like models

The findings of the present study reveal a complex and multi-faceted picture regarding the role of native-like accent models for Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners. Both data sets indicate a clear and pronounced trend towards American English. This orientation substantiates the observations of numerous studies (e.g. Richter & Weissenböck, 2021; Banzina, 2025) which document a shift in learner affinity from RP towards GA, often attributed to the pervasive influence of globally dominant media and popular culture. The Austrian context, with its RP-oriented instructional tradition, thus mirrors a broader continental pattern where institutional norms increasingly diverge from learners' experiential and aspirational realities. This convergence between preference, perceived familiarity, and actual phonetic output aligns with research showing that sustained exposure strongly shapes learners' accent models (Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997, p. 126; Tsang, 2024, p. 11; Lenhardt & Meer, 2025, p. 6)

Beyond mere passive awareness, the capacity to discriminate between accents appears to play an active role in shaping learners' pronunciation goals and orientations. An important consideration is that the participants in this study demonstrated relatively high confidence in distinguishing between American and British accents, with a strong mean rating on the discrimination scale. Further, most students were able to correctly identify the accent of a prominent English-speaking social media personality whom they explicitly viewed as a role model, demonstrating an active and personal

engagement with these models. These findings suggest that students perceive accent distinctions clearly enough to formulate informed pronunciation goals, a prerequisite for meaningful target selection. Comparable results have been reported by Tsang (2020, p. 152), whose mixed-methods study of tertiary-level bilingual students in Hong Kong found that learners who can identify accent differences are more likely to develop articulated preferences. In the current study, this finding appears to imply that the students may align their pronunciation with models that match their exposure and identity. In this sense, the ability to distinguish between accents did not merely reflect passive awareness but appeared to facilitate intentional orientation towards a model. The results, thus, underscore the continued relevance of native-like models for students' pronunciation goals. Consistent with earlier studies (Scales et al., 2006, p. 734; Timmis, 2002, p. 243), many learners in the present investigation expressed a desire to sound native-like and reported that such an accent signals strong English skills and successful language learning. The mean value for the statement "Achieving a native-like accent is an important sign of strong English-speaking skills." indicates that this belief remains widespread. This pattern mirrors observations by Tsang (2020, p. 152), who found that learners studying in Hong Kong maintain strong ideological attachments to native norms despite increasing exposure to non-native varieties. Similarly, Roberts (2020, p. 203) argues that native accents continue to hold symbolic prestige, often serving aspirational targets even when learners recognise them as difficult to achieve.

Interestingly, responses to the question "How happy are you with your English accent at the moment?" revealed a generally positive self-assessment, with the majority of participants indicating they were either happy or very happy. This suggests that native likeness may function more as an abstract ideal than as a strict benchmark for self-evaluation. This finding stands in contrast to studies reporting high linguistic insecurity among learners, such as that by Seyranyan and Westphal (2021, pp. 81–82), who found that Armenian students downgraded their own accents significantly more than German learners of English, demonstrating a persistent deference to standard native accents. The high self-reported accent satisfaction in the present Austrian context may, however, be explained by the specific alignment between learners' preferred model and their dominant everyday input, which was largely GA. This alignment may also be related to age, as the 17-19-year-old learners in the present study belong to a generation that has been immersed in American English from early childhood through

digital media, a pattern documented across European contexts (Banzina, 2025, p. 68; Richter & Weissenböck, 2021, p. 8). This sustained, age-typical exposure to GA via streaming platforms, social media, and gaming has been shown to shape both learners' pronunciation preferences and their perception of what constitutes an achievable accent target (Lenhardt & Meer, 2025, p. 6; Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1657). Unlike older cohorts whose media consumption was dominated by British English (Przedlacka, 2017, p. 54), this generation seems to have internalised American English features as familiar and achievable, potentially transforming it from a distant native speaker ideal into an accessible and personally relevant target. This congruence between aspiration, exposure, and perceived progress appears to foster a more positive and pragmatic self-assessment, where intelligibility and personal approximation to a familiar model are valued alongside or above the attainment of an abstract native-like standard.

The present findings, therefore, also show that intelligibility is valued highly next to nativeness, reflecting a more nuanced orientation than the traditional native speaker ideal. When presented with discrete statements about native speaker norms and intelligibility, learners rated the two statements concerning intelligibility, namely (1) "Clear and understandable pronunciation matters more than sounding like a native speaker." (2) "The most important goal of pronunciation is to be easily understood by others.", notably higher than statements endorsing native speaker norms. When being asked what their primary pronunciation learning goal was, students rated "being easily understood" as the second most important goal, following their stated primary aim of achieving a GA accent, which parallels the growing emphasis on intelligibility and communicative effectiveness in contemporary pronunciation research (Algharabali & Taqi, 2018, p. 251; Jenkins, 2009, pp. 200–201; Munro & Derwing, 2020, p. 301). Crucially, this demonstrates that learners do not view intelligibility and accent preference as mutually exclusive, but as complementary aims. The perceived importance of intelligibility underscores a learner awareness that communicative success does not hinge on accent perfection but rather on the clear transmission of meaning, a pragmatic priority that aligns with pedagogical models prioritizing comprehensibility over accent reduction (Derwing, 2012, p. 5; Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 482). The coexistence of these two goals, aspiring to nativelikeness while simultaneously recognising intelligibility as central, illustrates the hybrid nature of learners' target models. Rather than fully abandoning the native accent ideal, learners

appear to maintain the ideal symbolically while adopting more communicatively oriented goals in practice. This pattern of dual goals contextualises findings by Lenhardt and Meer (2025, p. 4): While learners report aspiring to target accents, the alignment between these aims and their EFL pronunciation is partial, feature-dependent, and overall limited, indicating aspirations do not straightforwardly dictate phonological output.

Overall, the findings point to a multifaceted relationship between native-like models, exposure and learner attitudes. Students continue to perceive native accents as desirable and meaningful, consistent with longstanding research on accent prestige. However, intelligibility remains a central goal alongside nativeness, indicating that students' orientations blend traditional ideals with pragmatic communicative aims. These complex, partially contradictory, tendencies suggest that pronunciation targets are evolving among Austrian learners and that pedagogical approaches must account for the changing balance between longstanding models, exposure outside the classroom and a growing interest in intelligibility among learners.

6.2 The role of EE

The present study provides strong evidence that EE plays a substantial role in Austrian upper-secondary students' lives. EE exposure was highly frequent among all participants, as they reported recurrent exposure to and engagement with English through digital media, particularly streaming platforms, YouTube, TikTok, films and social networking environments. As Smit and Schwarz (2019, p. 307) document, young Austrians mainly encounter English via media, and a substantial majority use English on a daily basis. This pattern aligns with extensive research documenting that contemporary adolescents encounter English outside school at unprecedented rates (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 935). As these activities increasingly dominate teenagers' daily routines, EE does not merely supplement classroom instruction but constitutes a parallel input system with substantial effects on linguistic development, including pronunciation preferences and accent awareness.

A key finding concerning the questionnaire is that learners reported more passive exposure than active engagement, indicating that they primarily consume English (watching, listening, scrolling, reading) rather than using it productively (posting, chatting, commenting, creating content). This mirrors established patterns in EE research: receptive activities dominate (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1659) as they

appear to require significantly less cognitive and linguistic effort, and they are seamlessly embedded in leisure behaviour. Learners, for instance, can simply open social media (e.g., Instagram or TikTok) and are flooded with English content. In contrast, active EE requires intentional participation, sufficient linguistic confidence, and a social context in which learners feel comfortable speaking or writing in English (Sundqvist, 2024, p. 81). These conditions are not always met. Thus, the predominance of passive EE in the present study reflects typical usage patterns among adolescents, even though productive EE has been shown to be particularly beneficial for pronunciation development (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024, pp. 12–13). Consequently, although GA fills their digital worlds, passive exposure alone may have only a limited and indirect effect on their actual pronunciation.

Another prominent pattern, when considering the questionnaire results, concerns the nature of the English input learners reported. The study shows that most students claim to be exposed to either predominantly GA or a mixture of GA and RP, with GA dominating the digital content they consume daily. The predominance of GA exposure is unsurprising given current media ecologies: American English dominates global video platforms, entertainment channels, and user-generated content (Schwarz, 2020, p. 278; Seyranyan & Westphal, 2021, p. 82). This trend is reflected in the data as well, namely in the specific activities that characterise the students' extramural immersion: students' musical consumption is likely to be dominated by anglophone pop (Gibson, 2024, p. 472) and their viewing habits favour short-form video platforms where creators who speak with a GA accent are highly influential (Banzina, 2025, p. 68). It should be noted here that gaming, which also emerged as a prominent EE activity in the current research, may have a significant influence on learners' language development, as both the digital games they play and the gaming streamers they watch provide sustained exposure to authentic English input (Kreider, 2026, p. 42). This gaming experience can include a range of varieties, not only American English, but nonetheless offers rich opportunities for phonological and interactional development (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012, pp. 314–315). Taken together, the learners' perceptual reports and the described media ecology point to an overwhelming influence of American English, thereby creating a sustained tension between the RP tradition in classroom and GA-saturated reality of their everyday lives.

Interestingly, students reported relatively low levels of deliberate accent imitation. The low mean score of the item "I try to imitate the English accent I hear on social media

(e.g. series, films, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) or movies or shows” ($M = 3.73$) indicates that while imitation does occur, it is not a primary or conscious strategy for most learners. This suggests that students do not intentionally try to sound American or British, even when they enjoy content featuring those accents. Their attitudes towards the English accents they are exposed to outside school do not necessarily translate into active attempts to reproduce what they hear. This is consistent with the scarcity of active EE engagement more generally: if learners rarely use English productively in informal settings, opportunities for conscious pronunciation practice remain limited. Yet research strongly suggests that even without conscious imitation, EE can exert substantial implicit influence on pronunciation. Studies show that repeated exposure to specific phonetic patterns, especially through audiovisual input, shapes learners’ perceptual categories and production tendencies over time, often without their explicit awareness (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016, p. 121; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024, pp. 10–11). Adolescents who regularly consume GA-accented media may therefore develop a more GA-oriented phonological system even when they do not deliberately imitate the accent. Although explicit imitation was not strongly endorsed by students in the present study, it remains likely that implicit phonetic alignment plays a role in shaping their evolving accent preferences and pronunciation intuitions, which is further discussed in the next chapter.

In sum, the present findings reinforce the view that EE plays a decisive role in shaping learners’ accent-related attitudes and pronunciation orientations. Students consume large amounts of English, mainly through passive activities, with GA dominating the input. Although learners do not report frequent deliberate imitation of the accents they are exposed to on social media, existing research supports the likelihood of implicit influence on both their preferences and production. EE thus emerges as a powerful, often underestimated force regarding pronunciation learning. Understanding the strength and direction of this influence is essential for evaluating learners’ pronunciation goals and for designing pedagogical approaches that reflect contemporary linguistic realities.

6.3 The relationship between perception and production

Apart from investigating model accents and the impact of EE, another central concern of the present study was to determine the extent to which learners’ self-perceived accent orientation corresponds with their actual phonetic production. This question is

crucial because research has consistently shown that what learners believe about their own accent and what they produce does not always align (Scales et al., 2006, p. 735; Roberts, 2020, p. 202). The current findings reflect this broader trend: although many students expressed a clear preference for GA and reported considerable familiarity with American English through EE, their production patterns displayed a far more heterogeneous and blended profile. Yet, despite this variability, the overall direction of the results confirms a general, though not uniform, tendency towards GA features, aligning with the steadily increasing influence of American English in European youth culture and online environments, described above.

The analysis of the read-aloud task revealed that learners, as a group, produced more GA-consistent realisations than RP-like ones, regarding rhoticity and flapping. This finding resonates with previous research showing that high exposure to GA through digital media can shape learners' developing phonological systems even when RP remains the dominant instructional model (Tsang, 2024, p. 10). Further, the allocation procedure demonstrated that most learners' self-reported accent orientation matched the predominant features in their recordings. This finding indicates that the learners in this study possess a relatively accurate awareness of their own accent tendencies, aligning with Tsang (2024, p. 10), who's study shows that EFL learners in highly mediatized contexts can successfully perceive distinctions between GA and RP and orient their pronunciation goal accordingly. The ability to discriminate between accents, as demonstrated in the current study, may therefore play a crucial role in enabling learners to develop accent preferences and production targets with some degree of self-awareness. In this regard, these findings contrast with Scales et al. (2006, p. 735), who reported that learners often fail to identify the accents they admire or imitate. The greater accuracy observed here may reflect the increased salience of accent variation in contemporary digital media ecosystems, where exposure is more frequent, more diverse, and more multimodal.

However, several noteworthy exceptions complicate this general trend. The mismatches between self-perception and production, as seen in the extreme cases described in section 5.4, illustrate that individual variability remains substantial and cannot be explained solely by exposure patterns. These divergences highlight a key insight: speakers may hold strong beliefs about their pronunciation goals, yet their actual production may reflect different influences entirely. For instance, students may view one accent more positively yet speak predominantly with another (Roberts, 2020,

p. 201), and learners' accent aims may show only limited alignment with their actual pronunciation (Lenhard & Meer, 2025, p. 6). In other words, a conscious preference for an accent does not automatically translate into phonetic output. Most learners displayed more nuanced patterns, combining rhotic and non-rhotic realisations or alternating between tapped and untapped intervocalic /t/. Consistent with Jenkins' (2009, p. 201) argument that modern learners are increasingly exposed to a plurality of Englishes, the participants' pronunciation reflected hybridisation rather than fidelity to a single accent model. In a globalized and highly mediatized environment, accent fluidity and hybridisation are natural outcomes of diverse linguistic input and communicative needs. Such hybridisation is consistent with the findings of Ferragne et al. (2024, p. 15), whose study of French pre-service English teachers found that while two-thirds favoured GA and one-third RP, the majority exhibited mixed features from both accents rather than consistent adherence to a single variety. This hybridisation also reflects Lenhardt and Meer's (2025, p. 6) finding, based on an exploratory analysis of eight secondary school students in Germany, that learners today do not consistently orient toward one accent model but instead draw on a range of linguistic resources shaped by their exposure to English. Similarly, Sung (2016, p. 195), whose study of university-level learners in Hong Kong found that learners perceived exposure to multiple English accents as crucial for facilitating communication with both native and non-native speakers, explicitly acknowledging its role in smoothing out EFL interactions. Taken together, these studies highlight a growing recognition that accent hybridisation is both a natural outcome of diverse input and a valuable resource for communication. This is especially relevant in contexts like Austria, where RP still holds symbolic prestige in educational settings, while GA dominates learners' everyday media environments.

However, while the studies mentioned above demonstrate the potential value of hybridisation and exposure to multiple accents, exposure to a particular accent does not guarantee its consistent adoption in learners' own speech. Despite most students in the present study reporting either predominantly GA-oriented input or balanced exposure to both GA and RP, largely due to the dominance of American English on social media (Richter & Weissenböck, 2021, p. 8), this consumption does not automatically lead to the adoption of a consistent GA accent. Learners still encounter RP, for instance through their textbooks. As illustrated in chapter 3.6, Gamsjäger's (2024, p. 85) analysis of Austrian lower-secondary EFL coursebooks revealed that both

MORE! (Gerngross et al., 2023) and *easy* (Banick & Preedy, 2023) series primarily promote RP as their model accent. Moreover, the current study shows that learners may also have social media role models who speak with an RP accent (e.g., Millie Bobby Brown or Kit Harington), further reinforcing their exposure to British English. This suggests that while GA may dominate learners' media exposure, RP maintains a notable presence. As a result, their speech often blends GA and RP features. Thus, their pronunciation may ultimately be governed by a pragmatic goal: intelligibility. Rather than striving for categorical native-like perfection of one accent, they, consciously or unconsciously, draw on features from both accessible models to maximise clarity. However, given the reported prominence of EE input, it follows that perceptually salient GA features were more frequently and systematically incorporated. This aligns with findings from Munro and Derwing (2015, p. 393), which suggested that while exposure may facilitate the acquisition of particular phonetic features, it rarely leads to full phonological consistency without formal guidance.

Taken together, the findings paint a nuanced picture of how Austrian EFL learners navigate accent acquisition. Learners tend to gravitate towards GA features, consistent with their exposure patterns and reported preferences, yet their production remains highly mixed and only partially aligned with their stated goals. Most importantly, while the majority correctly perceived their own accent orientation, the presence of extreme mismatches and widespread hybridisation demonstrates that accent development in this context is neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interplay between instruction, exposure, identity, and perceptual ability, an interplay that underscores the need for further empirical research in the Austrian setting to better understand how accent preferences translate into phonetic outcomes.

6.4 Implications for pronunciation teaching in Austria

The findings of this study carry important implications for pronunciation pedagogy in the Austrian EFL context, where learners navigate a complex landscape shaped by school-based exposure to RP-oriented input and substantial extramural contact with predominantly American English. As the results demonstrate, learners' accent preferences, perceptions, and production tendencies are neither uniform nor straightforward. Instead, they reflect an interplay of orientations towards native norms, pragmatic considerations of intelligibility, and the influence of increasing contact with diverse accents through EE. These dynamics highlight the need for a more flexible,

informed, and learner-responsive approach to pronunciation instruction that aligns with current theoretical perspectives and pedagogical realities.

One key implication concerns the importance of explicitly engaging learners in discussions about pronunciation goals. As research has shown, learner beliefs and attitudes play a significant role in shaping pronunciation development, influencing their motivation in the EFL classroom (Algharabali & Taqi, 2018, p. 255). Various studies indicate that many learners continue to express interest in native(-like) pronunciation for reasons of prestige or perceived correctness (Mahboob, 2004, p. 28; Tsang, 2020, p. 141), even though the same learners may acknowledge the practicality and attainability of intelligibility-focused goals (Munro & Derwing, 2020, p. 300). The present study similarly found that although intelligibility was rated as highly important, many learners still oriented toward GA or, more generally, a native-like accent as desirable long-term target. In light of this, Austrian teachers should not assume uniform learner goals but instead inquire about students' pronunciation aspirations, discuss their feasibility, and collaboratively determine realistic and pedagogically sound objectives. This student-centred approach for pronunciation instruction aligns with the findings by Timmis (2002, p. 243), who discovered that many teachers expressed no preference regarding which accent model to teach, emphasising instead that the wishes of the students and the contexts in which they were going to use English were central.

At the same time, even if the findings highlight diverse accent patterns, teachers should avoid shifting their own accents in an attempt to align with learners' preferences. As Richter and Weissenböck (2021, p. 9) emphasised, a teacher's accent, often RP in Austria, can have an effect on the student's pronunciation. However, this should not mean that teachers should change their accent to fit the student's exposure patterns. Instead, the pedagogical focus should lie in broadening the range of input provided in the classroom. From a didactic perspective, teachers should maintain consistency in their own accent as a clear model for learners (Sewell, 2016, pp. 92–93), but this does not require them to enforce that accent on students. Having a consistent model accent in the classroom provides learners with a stable reference point, while still allowing them to pursue their own pronunciation goals (Jenkins, 2009, p. 202). However, this consistency should not come at the expense of exposing students to the diversity of English accents they will inevitably encounter in real-world communication. Given that contemporary English functions as a global Lingua Franca and that English users

routinely encounter a wide array of accents, classroom instruction should reflect this diversity. Offering learners exposure to multiple varieties can support both intelligibility-based learning and the development of accent tolerance (Jenkins, 1998, pp. 124–125; Tsang, 2024, p. 11). Crucially, this diversity of input does not require teachers to imitate other accents but rather to curate varied materials, including audio recordings, video clips, and examples of authentic speech from different speakers. In this way, teachers can provide a consistent model while simultaneously broadening learners' receptive competence.

Consistent with an intelligibility-oriented framework, Austrian pronunciation teaching should place intelligibility at the centre of instruction, in line with the findings of the current study as well as the aims of the curriculum. The Austrian national educational standards for English emphasise communicative competence, intelligibility and comprehensibility as core learning outcomes (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2009), aligning with long-standing scholarly consensus that intelligibility, not nativeness, is the most realistic and pedagogically sound target for the vast majority of learners (Derwing & Munro, 2009, p. 483; Munro & Derwing, 1995, pp. 302–303). However, while intelligibility should be the primary goal, this does not preclude offering optional, targeted activities for learners who express an interest in refining features associated with specific accents. As the current study shows, some learners do aim for a native-like accent. Rather than dismissing these goals as unattainable, teachers can support them selectively, for example through contrastive phonetics tasks, minimal pair work, or targeted listening exercises, while still anchoring the overall course objectives in intelligibility and communication. For this direction of EFL teaching to work, however, classroom materials need to be updated.

Historically, in Austria, EFL teaching materials have aligned strongly with RP (Richter & Weissenböck, 2021, p. 8). If intelligibility is to be foregrounded, textbooks and audio materials should be revised to present multiple varieties of English and highlight features that enhance comprehensibility rather than those associated with prestige. Pronunciation instruction could instead focus on “segmentals, nuclear stress and the effective use of articulatory setting” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 121) as well as “general speaking habits, suprasegmental features, rate [and] voice quality” (Derwing, 2012, p. 5). These are all features that enhance intelligibility, while respecting each speaker's individual model. Textbooks should therefore provide speech samples from different English speakers, explanations of accent diversity, and activities that help learners

improve their intelligibility and comprehensibility instead of imitating a certain accent model. Such an approach better prepares learners for real-world interaction, where being understood does not depend on having a specific accent.

In addition, the results of this study underscore the importance of incorporating EE into classroom practices. Since Austrian learners reported high levels of EE exposure, particularly in activities dominated by GA input, teachers should acknowledge and leverage this exposure rather than treat it as external or irrelevant. EE can be integrated through structured reflection (e.g., analysing accents encountered on social media), contrastive listening tasks comparing RP and GA tokens, or discussion about how learners perceive and interpret different accents in real-world contexts. Such integration not only validates learners' linguistic experiences outside of school but also supports a more holistic understanding of English as used in everyday global communication. Since EE activities are by definition voluntary (Sundqvist & Uztosun, 2024, p. 1642), formalising them in the classroom risks diminishing their motivational appeal. Therefore, a sensitive, context-dependent approach that values student attitudes is essential. However, as several scholars have shown, EE can play a substantial role in shaping learners' phonological development and attitude formation (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022, p. 950; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024, p. 11), and classroom instruction can thus benefit explicitly from connecting to these experiences. Teacher education programmes should therefore prepare future teachers to recognise and harness learners' EE experiences, equipping them with strategies to integrate these informal learning experiences into classroom practice without diminishing their intrinsic motivational value.

Finally, pronunciation pedagogy in Austria must adopt an approach that accepts, rather than penalises, mixed-accent output. Given that most learners in this study, and in international research more broadly, show hybridised pronunciation patterns that blend features from different varieties (Sewell, 2016, p. 163), insisting on internally consistent native-like accents is both unrealistic and pedagogically unhelpful. Instead, as Munro and Derwing (2020, p. 301) recommended, teachers should actively promote the idea that accent mixing is a natural outcome of multilingual exposure and should focus assessment on intelligibility, clarity, and communicative success. Emphasising accuracy only in selected targeted features (e.g., vowel length distinctions) can support learners' communicative effectiveness without enforcing rigid accent models that contradict current linguistic realities.

Taken together, these implications suggest that pronunciation teaching in Austria should be reoriented to become more learner-responsive, exposure-aware, and grounded in intelligibility, while still accommodating learner aspirations for specific accent targets. By making pronunciation goals explicit, diversifying input, integrating EE, and accepting mixed-accent output, Austrian EFL classrooms can more effectively support learners' communicative needs in a world where English is encountered across an unprecedented range of speakers, contexts, and varieties. Such an approach not only aligns with contemporary research but also bridges the gap, highlighted throughout this study, between traditional instructional models and learners' real-world linguistic experiences.

6.5 Limitations and directions for future research

While this thesis provides an important contribution to the underexplored field of accent attitudes and pronunciation orientations among Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research. These limitations relate to the sampling procedures, methodological decisions, and analytical scope of the study, all of which place boundaries around the conclusions that can be drawn.

A primary limitation lies in the size and scope of the sample. Although the study offers detailed insights into learners' perceptions, preferences, and production patterns, data were collected from two classes within a single school, resulting in a modest sample size. Such a restricted sampling context necessarily limits the generalisability of the results. Learners in other Austrian regions, school types, or sociolinguistic environments may exhibit different exposure patterns or pronunciation orientations, particularly as EE habits and teacher practices differ markedly across contexts. Future studies should therefore incorporate larger and more diverse samples, ideally across multiple schools and provinces, to establish whether the tendencies observed here reflect broader patterns among Austrian EFL learners.

In addition, the study employed descriptive rather than inferential statistical analyses. Because of the sample size and data structure, no inferential testing was conducted to evaluate the statistical significance of the relationships between EE exposure, accent attitudes, and production outcomes. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population or interpreted as evidence of systematic causal or correlational mechanisms. Future research with larger datasets should implement correlational,

regression-based, or mixed-effect approaches, which would enable a more fine-grained examination of how EE input, attitudes, and pronunciation behaviour interact over time.

Another methodological limitation concerns the task type used for the production component. Pronunciation was assessed solely through a controlled reading task. While such tasks support comparability across participants and allow for targeted analysis of specific segmental features, they do not necessarily reflect learners' spontaneous production in everyday communication. Munro and Derwing (2015, p. 24) note that spontaneous, naturalistic production is essential for evaluating EFL speech in a communicative context, since uncontrolled tasks are generally more representative of real-world speech. Future studies should therefore combine controlled tasks with spontaneous speech samples, such as picture descriptions, interviews, or storytelling activities, to gain a fuller picture of learners' pronunciation behaviour.

The scope of phonetic analysis also introduces limitations. This study focused on only two accent features and restricted the analysis to two reference accents. These choices were deliberate to ensure analytic precision and comparability, yet they necessarily present a narrow phonological lens. English accents differ in numerous segmental and suprasegmental aspects, including vowel quality, lexical stress, rhythm, and intonation. Limiting the analysis to only two consonantal features provides valuable insights but overlooks other phonetic cues that may contribute to learners' accent orientation or intelligibility. Future research should adopt a broader range of phonological variables, ideally integrating both segmental and suprasegmental features. Furthermore, the decision to operationalise only two model accents simplifies the linguistic landscape learners actually encounter. Young people are exposed to a wide array of Englishes, not only RP and GA but also Scottish, Canadian, Australian as well as native dialects and also non-native accents. The analytical focus on RP and GA therefore captures only a part of the phonetic influences shaping learners' pronunciation. Expanding future studies to address multi-accent exposure environments would better reflect the realities of today's digital and globalised English input.

Another limitation arises from the use of one single rater for the phonetic analysis. Although the rater used a grid and re-rated some samples after a two-week interval to

reduce intra-rater bias, a single rater design inherently limits the objectivity and reliability of the analysis. Pronunciation research consistently underscores the importance of inter-rater reliability in perceptual and phonetic judgment tasks. Future research should thus incorporate multiple raters and calculate inter-rater agreement to enhance the robustness and credibility of phonetic evaluations.

Taken together, these limitations highlight the need for further research that builds upon and extends the findings of this study. Future investigations could address several promising directions. First, studies with larger, regionally diverse participant groups would allow researchers to examine whether the accent attitudes and production patterns identified here are widespread or context specific. Second, expanding the methodological design to include spontaneous production tasks, longitudinal data, and inferential statistical modelling would enable stronger claims about developmental trajectories and the relationship between input, attitudes, and pronunciation behaviour. Third, future research should consider a wider range of phonological features and engage with multiple Englishes beyond RP and GA, acknowledging the diverse and fluid nature of learners' digital exposure landscapes. Finally, researchers should devote greater attention to learners' subjective experiences, evolving pronunciation goals, and identity orientations, particularly in contexts where instructional models and EE exposure patterns increasingly diverge.

By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a more comprehensive and generalisable understanding of how Austrian EFL learners navigate accent models and develop their own phonological repertoires within a rapidly changing linguistic environment.

7. Conclusion

This master thesis set out to examine Austrian upper-secondary EFL learners' attitudes towards RP and GA as well as how the same students produce features associated with these two influential accent models and how these attitudes relate to their exposure to EE. Grounded in ongoing debates about the role of native speaker norms, the growing relevance of intelligibility, and the increasing impact of global media exposure, the study sought to illuminate an underexplored intersection: the relationship between students' self-reported aims as well as attitudes, everyday linguistic input, and learners' actual phonetic behaviour in the Austrian context. The findings offer a

nuanced picture of how learners navigate, reconcile, and sometimes struggle with the divergence between classroom models and the varieties of English they encounter in their everyday lives.

A central insight of the study is that learners in Austria appear to be situated within a highly heterogeneous input environment. While RP continues to dominate Austrian teaching materials, the participants' reported media habits reveal a substantial presence of GA through social media, streaming platforms, music and gaming. This reflects a broader shift in global English exposure and positions GA as the variety learners encounter far more frequently in their daily lives than RP. Against this background, the learners' attitudinal responses demonstrated a clear tendency towards American English preferences. The findings also revealed a nuanced and sometimes contradictory landscape concerning accent models and intelligibility. On the one hand, learners continue to express an interest in native-like accents and view them as a desirable pronunciation goal. On the other hand, students also rated intelligibility as highly important, demonstrating an awareness of the communicative realities where speaking a specific accent is no longer necessary to be understood. This dual orientation suggests that native-like accents remain influential, while intelligibility is increasingly recognised as central to real world communication.

Moreover, EE emerged as an important component of learners' linguistic experience. Students reported substantial exposure to English outside the classroom, particularly through activities dominated by GA or mixed (GA as well as RP) input. The current findings complement previous research by showing that participants engage with English extensively yet unevenly, namely primarily through passive exposure rather than active engagement. This distinction matters because active EE activities are associated with deeper linguistic engagement, while passive ones primarily affect perception and familiarity. Although explicit imitation of media accents was reported as limited, learners' EE habits nonetheless appear to shape their preferences and perceptual orientations implicitly, aligning with studies indicating that frequent exposure to a certain accent variety has measurable effects on learners' attitudes and potentially also their actual pronunciation. The participants' EE profiles further helped contextualise the emergence of mixed accent patterns in production.

While learners leaned somewhat more towards GA-associated features, their overall output was mixed, with only a few students clearly pointing to one model. This hybridity

aligns with recent claims that learners increasingly develop fluid, non-uniform accent profiles shaped by pluralistic input rather than by adherence to a single stable norm. Interestingly, the generally accurate accent allocation among students who claimed to identify with RP or GA as well as the item about the social media idol suggest that learners have sufficient perceptual awareness to set pronunciation goals, even if their production does not reflect those goals consistently. This discrepancy between self-perception and realisation, found in both the present study and previous research, highlights the need for pronunciation instruction that supports learners in developing realistic pathways for production.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Austrian learners of English negotiate a linguistic environment in which instructional models, personal aspirations, and exposure outside the classroom interact in complex ways. Pronunciation learning does not unfold in isolation from real-world input, nor is it determined solely by classroom models. Instead, learners develop multifaceted and sometimes hybrid orientations that reflect the coexistence of native speaker ideologies, intelligibility-based perspectives, and the increasingly GA-dominated media landscape that surrounds them. Consequently, the focus of the traditional classroom on a single prestige accent risks becoming pedagogically misaligned, failing to equip learners with the adaptive skills needed for the hybrid, media-rich English ecology they actually navigate. The present study thus sheds light on a critical issue for contemporary pronunciation teaching: the need for clarity about instructional goals in an era of diverse Englishes, shifting media landscapes, and changing learner expectations.

Of course, the findings must be understood within the limitations of the study, including the small sample size, the restricted number of features analysed, and the reliance on one controlled reading task. As outlined in the previous chapter, future research with larger samples, spontaneous speech data, and more comprehensive phonetic analyses could provide a more fine-grained understanding of how Austrian learners' preferences and production develop over time.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a richer understanding of pronunciation learning in the Austrian context by showing how learners position themselves between classroom experiences and contemporary exposure realities. It underscores the importance of examining pronunciation not merely as an instructional domain but as a dynamic site where identity, input, aspiration, and pedagogy intersect.

Ultimately, the results affirm that effective pronunciation learning requires an approach that is both pedagogically grounded and attuned to the lived linguistic experiences of learners. This kind of approach would acknowledge the coexistence of diverse influences and supports learners in navigating this complex but increasingly relevant linguistic terrain.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

17.10.25, 12:30

Galley-proof Master_thesis_questionnaire (masterthesisOberlechner) 17.10.2025, 12:30



masterthesisOberlechner → Master_thesis_questionnaire

17.10.2025, 12:30

Page 01

Intro

PLEASE HOLD YOUR MOBILE PHONE IN LANDSCAPE MODE (=QUERFORMAT) TO SEE ALL ANSWER OPTIONS

This survey is part of my Master's thesis about how you, as Austrian students, think about different English accents and how using English outside of school might influence the way you speak English.

The survey takes about **10 minutes** to complete.

Important Information:

- Because of the nature of this study, you will be asked to provide your name so that your survey answers can later be linked to your recorded speech samples.
- Your name will NOT be used for research purposes within this study and will be **anonymised** during data analysis. Your identity will remain completely confidential.
- Participation is **voluntary**. You may stop at any point without giving a reason, and you may request that your data be withdrawn at any time.
- The survey will **not affect** your grades or your relationship with your school or teachers in any way.

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

All the best,

Hannah Oberlechner

Please write your full name here:

DE01 

How old are you? (only numbers)

DE02 

Which language(s) do you speak at home?

DE03 

No, not at
all

Yes,  easily

Do you think you can distinguish between an American English and British English accent?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

My pronunciation in English:

How would you describe your English accent at the moment?

NM03

[Please choose] ▼

Not happy
at all

Very
happy

NM04

How happy are you with your English accent at the moment?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

What is your main aim/goal for pronunciation learning?

NM05

[Please choose] ▼

Strongly
disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly
agree

NM06

Achieving a native-like accent is an important sign of strong English-speaking skills.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Clear and understandable pronunciation matters more than sounding like a native speaker.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

An English accent that sounds like a native speaker's is the ideal goal for learners.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

The most important goal of pronunciation is to be easily understood by others.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

English in my free time:

EE01 

	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always
I write text messages (e.g. WhatsApp) in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I write social media posts (e.g. captions under pictures) in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I play digital games that require writing in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I speak to other people in English on social media (e.g. voice messages).	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I play digital games that require speaking in English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I
create
videos
(e.g.
TikToks)
for
social
media
that
require
speaking
in
English.

EE02 

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always
I listen to English songs. ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I listen to English podcasts. ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I watch longer videos in English (e.g. YouTube). ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I watch English films, series or documentaries. ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I watch shorter videos in English (e.g. TikTok's or Reels). ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I read English content (e.g. captions) on social media. ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I read text messages (e.g. WhatsApp) ☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

in
English.

Page 05
EE 2

Which English accent do you hear most often outside of school (e.g. on social media, YouTube or in films, music, games)? EE03

[Please choose] ▼

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

Sometimes

Often

Very often

EE04
Always

I
try
to
imitate
the
English
accent
I
hear
on
social
media
(e.g.
series,
films,
YouTube,
TikTok,
Instagram)
or
movies
or
shows.

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Do you have a social media star, influencer, movie star, actor, musician, etc. whose English accent you really like? EE06

Write their name here:

What kind of accent does that person speak? EE05

[Please choose] ▼

Thank you very much for completing this survey!

If you have any questions about the study, you can contact me using the following email address:

hannah.oberlechner@univie.ac.at.

Once again, thank you for your time and effort! 😊

Last Page

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

We would like to thank you very much for helping us.

Your answers were submitted, you may close the browser window or tab now.

Hannah Oberlechner, Universität Wien – 2025

Appendix B: Reading task

The Mystery of the Old Radio

One rainy Thursday, Tom discovered an old radio in his grandmother's attic. It was dusty, but he could still read the label: "*Made in America, 1920.*" Excited, he glanced at it and wiped it clean and plugged it in. To his surprise, it crackled to life!

A man announced: "*Welcome to Mystery Hour!*" Then, eerie music played. Tom listened closely as the host described a hidden treasure buried close to the river. The directions were vague, but Tom decided to investigate.

The next day, Tom invited his better half, Danny, to join him. They packed a map, a flashlight and some water. Close to the riverbank, they spotted an old tree with a carving: "*Turn right after twenty steps.*" Following the clue, they dug under a big rock and found a metal box. Inside was a note: "*The real treasure is the adventure.*" Disappointed but amused, they laughed and headed home.

Later that night, Tom turned the radio on again, but this time, it only played static. Had it all been a strange coincidence? Was the radio truly magical? He decided to keep it...just in case.

Appendix C: Blank analytic rating grids for reading task

Rhotic /r/				
word	Rhotic (GA)	non-rhotic (RP)	word/sound not pronounced	other
Thursday				
discovered				
grandmother's				
surprise				
Hour				
treasure				
river				
were				
riverbank				
carving				
Turn				
after				
adventure				
turned				
<i>Total</i>				
<i>Percentages</i>				

Flapping				
word	Pronounced as “d” (GA)	Pronounced as “t” (RP)	word/sound not pronounced	other
attic				
excited				
at it				
it in				
invited				
better				
water				
spotted				
twenty				
metal				
later				
it only				
static				
had it				
<i>Total</i>				
<i>Percentages</i>				

AI use information

This thesis involved the use of AI in the research and writing process. Specifically, ChatGPT and DeepSeek were employed as a creative and editorial assistant to draft the reading passage for the reading-aloud task, to refine awkward phrasing and suggest alternative wording, to generate ideas for section headings and organisational flow, to design a template for the pronunciation analysis grid, and to re-evaluate the thesis for consistency and assist with proofreading. All AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated, modified where necessary, and integrated only when they aligned with the academic rigor of this study. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final work.

Zusammenfassung

Österreichische Schüler:innen sind heute nicht nur im Englischunterricht, sondern vor allem außerhalb der Schule ständig von der englischen Sprache umgeben, besonders durch den amerikanischen Akzent auf Plattformen wie TikTok. Dadurch geraten ihre eigenen Ausspracheziele mitunter in Konflikt mit traditionellen Unterrichtsmodellen, die in Österreich nach wie vor stark britisch geprägt sind. Während es hierzu bereits Forschung aus anderen Ländern gibt, fehlen für Österreich bislang Untersuchungen dazu, wie Schüler:innen zu verschiedenen Aussprachemodellen stehen, in welchem Ausmaß sie Englisch außerhalb der Schule nutzen und wie sich dies tatsächlich in ihrer eigenen Aussprache niederschlägt. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht daher, wie Oberstufenschüler:innen in Österreich zwei bedeutende Aussprachemodelle, Received Pronunciation (RP) und General American (GA), wahrnehmen und bewerten. Zudem fragt sie, ob die Präferenzen der Schüler:innen sowie ihr Kontakt mit Englisch außerhalb der Schule mit ihrer Verwendung von rhotic /r/ und intervocalic /t/ flapping zusammenhängen. Datengrundlage bilden 30 Schüler:innen einer AHS in Wien. Mit einem Mixed-Methods-Design wurden ein Fragebogen zu Aussprachenhaltungen, -zielen und zum außerschulischen Englischkonsum sowie eine Lesesprachprobe erhoben, die auf die genannten Merkmale hin analysiert wurde. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine deutliche Präferenz für amerikanisches Englisch. Gleichzeitig bleibt das Ideal eines Muttersprachlichen Akzentes (native-like accent) als Ausspracheziel bei den Lernenden präsent, auch wenn Verständlichkeit (Intelligibility) ebenfalls als wichtig erachtet wird. Der außerschulische Kontakt mit Englisch erfolgt überwiegend passiv und ist stark auf amerikanisches Englisch ausgerichtet. Die Analyse der Leseprobe zeigt, dass amerikanisch geprägte Muster insgesamt häufiger auftreten, auch wenn die Verwendung der Merkmale variiert. Beim Vergleich zwischen dem selbst eingeschätzten Akzent und der tatsächlichen Aussprache zeigt sich weitgehend Übereinstimmung, aber auch einige auffällige Abweichungen. Diese deuten auf Diskrepanz zwischen Selbstwahrnehmung und phonetischem Befund hin. Insgesamt legen die Ergebnisse nahe, dass der Englischunterricht in Österreich von einer breiteren Berücksichtigung verschiedener Aussprache Modelle, einer stärkeren Betonung der Verständlichkeit und einer bewussteren Auseinandersetzung mit den eigenen Aussprachezielen der Lernenden profitieren könnte.