From BBC to Netflix and Amazon Prime? Exploring pre-service EFL teachers' choice of a model accent.

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This paper

- reports on the first phase of a larger mixed-methods study on EFL pronunciation learning and teaching in Austria;
- provides insights into how pre-service EFL teachers decide on a model accent;
- discusses the pedagogical implications of a model accent;
- makes suggestions for pre-service teachers who are undecided.

1. Rationale

Few would contest the observation that an EFL teacher's accent – native or non-native – is likely to influence not only their learners' attitudes towards the teacher and the subject (e.g., DuBois, 2018; Hendriks et al., 2021; Kristiansen, 2001; McGillis, 2017), but also the learners' own pronunciation skills (e.g., Richter, 2019). Evidently, the decision, which model accent to adopt is particularly relevant for prospective English language teachers.

In a narrow sense, a model accent can be viewed as the variety presented in the classroom for imitation (e.g. through the teacher's own accent or via audio material). In a broader sense, however, the accent the learners are exposed to outside class, for instance on television or the internet, could also be considered a type of model (e.g. Sewell, 2016). Clearly, 21st century learners encounter an unparalleled diversity of accents, which prompts the question whether a specific model accent in a narrow sense is actually necessary or even helpful in EFL teaching. Yet a great number of empirical studies support the assumption that the majority of EFL teachers favour the use of a model, arguing that it is a useful tool to guarantee pedagogical consistency and clarity (e.g., Henderson et al., 2012; Mompean, 2004; Young & Walsh, 2010).

Assuming that a model accent can indeed be beneficial when teaching pronunciation, the question arises which accent this should be. In fact, this issue has been at the heart of many heated debates among learners, teachers, and researchers alike. In view of the increasingly

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important role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and the vast range of different English accents spoken all over the world, it is captivating to see that the two most popular models for the majority of the learners in the 21st century still seem to be "British English" (BE) and "American English" †(AE) (e.g., Mompean, 2004; Moyer, 2013; Smakman, 2017). In fact, empirical studies have demonstrated a strong belief in the rightful dominance of "prestigious" native-speaker pronunciation models (e.g., Archer, 2021), most notably BE and AE (e.g., Brabcova & Skarnitzl, 2018; Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997; Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006; Richter, 2021). The main reasons underlying the preference for these two varieties have been related to specific teacher training programmes (e.g. pronunciation classes with a focus on either accent), the availability of teaching materials and coursebooks, personal attitudes and motivation, geo-cultural proximity to the country where the accent is spoken, as well as media exposure (e.g., Mompean, 2008).

Owing to geo-political reasons, the most favoured reference accent in Europe has long been British English (e.g., Gimson, 1980; Mompean, 2004; Smakman, 2017). However, recent research findings on European learners have suggested a growing interest in American English. In particular, the increasing popularity of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Disney Plus, which are largely dominated by American English, has left its imprint on students' motivation to choose AE rather than BE. This observation has been made in countries such as Belgium (e.g., Nijs, 2016), Sweden (e.g., Arvidsson, 2017; Flisberg, 2018), and Norway (e.g., Rindal, 2015). So far, no empirical study has attempted to trace this shift towards AE in the Austrian context.

2. Research questions

In order to fill this gap in the literature, our research intends to take stock of the situation in Austria. This paper reports on the findings of the first phase of a larger project exploring the role of model accents in EFL pronunciation learning and teaching in Austria. Hence, the main research question addressed here is: How do Austrian pre-service EFL teachers choose a model accent? More specifically, the following sub-questions were formulated:

RQ1

How difficult do pre-service teachers find the decision to choose between British English and American English as a model accent?

RQ2

Which other model accents would pre-service EFL teachers be interested in learning?

RQ 3

What are the main reasons for choosing a particular model accent?

RQ 4

Is there a trend among Austrian pre-service teachers to choose American English rather than British English?

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† It has to be noted here that the two terms "British English" and "American English" respectively will be used in this paper to denote the region-less, assumed standard variety of the two accents. At the same time it is clear that these labels encompass a considerable amount of variation and can therefore only serve as a general orientation.

3. Study description

Against the backdrop of having taught pronunciation courses at the University of Vienna for more than twenty years, we aim to shed light on the ramifications such a decision may have in view of our students' future classroom situation. In this part of our research project, we decided to investigate the criteria pre-service teachers of English apply when asked to select a model accent in the course of their university education.

3.1 Participants

All participants in this study were pre-service teachers taking the pronunciation class "Practical Phonetics and Oral Communication Skills 1" (PPOCS 1). In this class, the students can choose between BE and AE. They were all enrolled in the bachelor of education (BEd) programme at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna. In line with the standards set by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2018), their general level of English language competence was expected to be at least B2. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic composition of the participants who completed and returned the questionnaire.

Table 1: Participants

	Group 1: BE	Group 2: AE
Number	25	58
Female	21	51
Male	4	7
3rd gender	0	0

In total, 83 students took part in the study. 58 participants chose American English and 25 opted for British English. Female students outnumbered male students by an approximate ratio of 5:1 for British English and 7:1 for American English. This male-female ratio largely reflects gender distribution at the department. The average age of participants was 23. No significant differences (Mann-Whitney-U-Test, $p < .05$) between the AE and the BE groups could be observed regarding age, gender, or degree programme.

3.2 Methodology

To address the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, by which quantitative data was complemented by the qualitative analysis of a selected number of open questions in the survey. The present paper only reports on the quantitative part. The anonymous questionnaire was administered online using the web-based software Unipark (Unipark, 2021). Participation was encouraged by the PPOCS 1 lecturers but entirely voluntary. In order to address the fourth research question, data about student figures was obtained from the university administration.

3.3 Instruments

In the first few sessions of the PPOCS 1 course at the University of Vienna, the link to an online questionnaire was given to all students. This questionnaire consisted of three main parts: In Part 1, the participants provided information regarding their socio-demographic background. Part 2 included questions about the difficulty of choosing an accent, the main reasons for their choice and questions about other accents that they would like to see offered. Finally, Part 3 intended to gauge students' attitudes towards AE and BE. In this section, different statements about these two model accents were given, and the answers were marked on a six-point Likert scale including (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) slightly agree, (4) slightly disagree, (5) disagree and (6) strongly disagree.

3.4 Data analysis

Data corresponding to the first three research questions was analysed using descriptive statistics and SPSS Statistics 22. For inferential statistical analysis and for capturing the differences between participants enrolled in the British English and participants enrolled in the American English section, or correlations between the two variables, a Mann-Whitney-U-Test was applied. The data was not normally distributed as the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed.

4. Findings

4.1 Decision difficulty

As shown in Figure 1, the overall decision-making process on whether to register for BE or AE was relatively straightforward. The majority of participants found it "very easy" or "easy" to select the accent they were interested in. Still, despite a clear indication that participants had few doubts about their model accent, Figure 1 also reveals some discrepancies in decision-making between the two student groups. 20.7% of AE participants found the decision "slightly difficult", in comparison with only 4.0% of BE participants. This also confirms many informal observations we have made in our courses according to which very few students express doubts about their chosen model accent. It is interesting to note, however, that the students in the AE groups found the decision marginally more challenging.
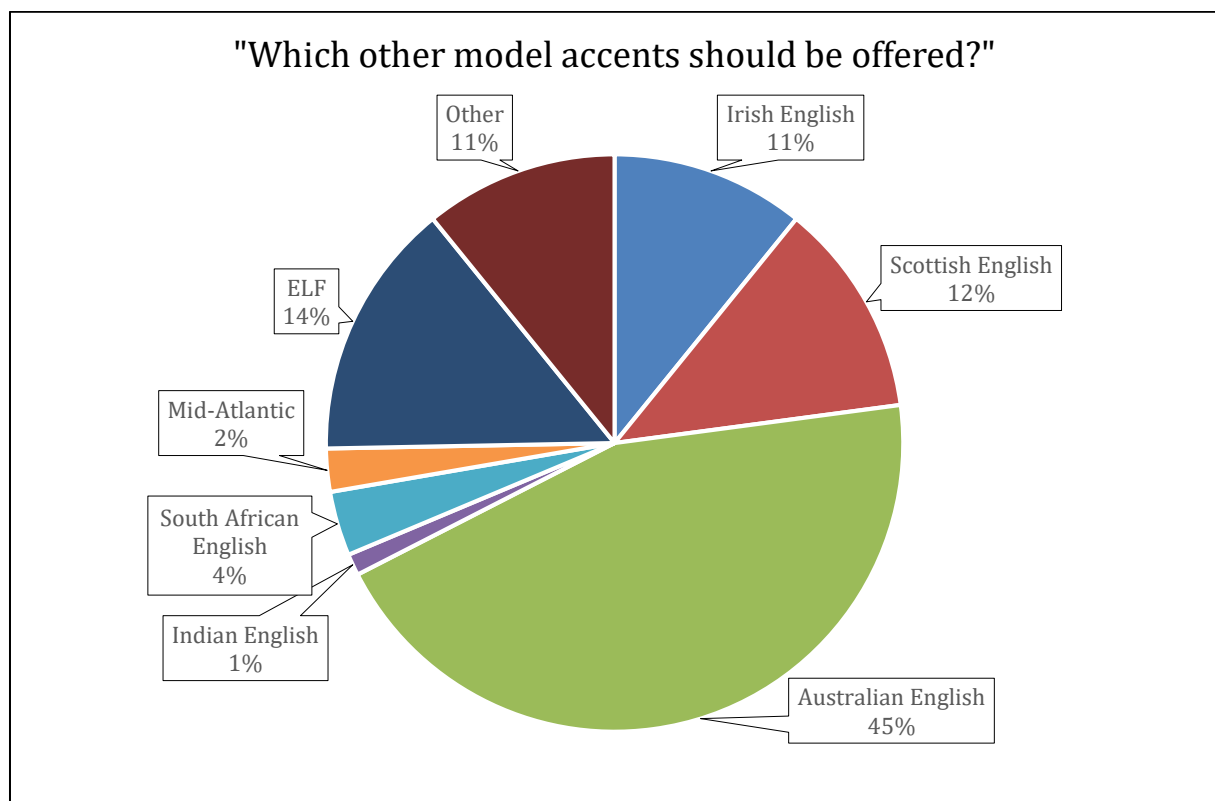
Figure 2: Decision difficulty
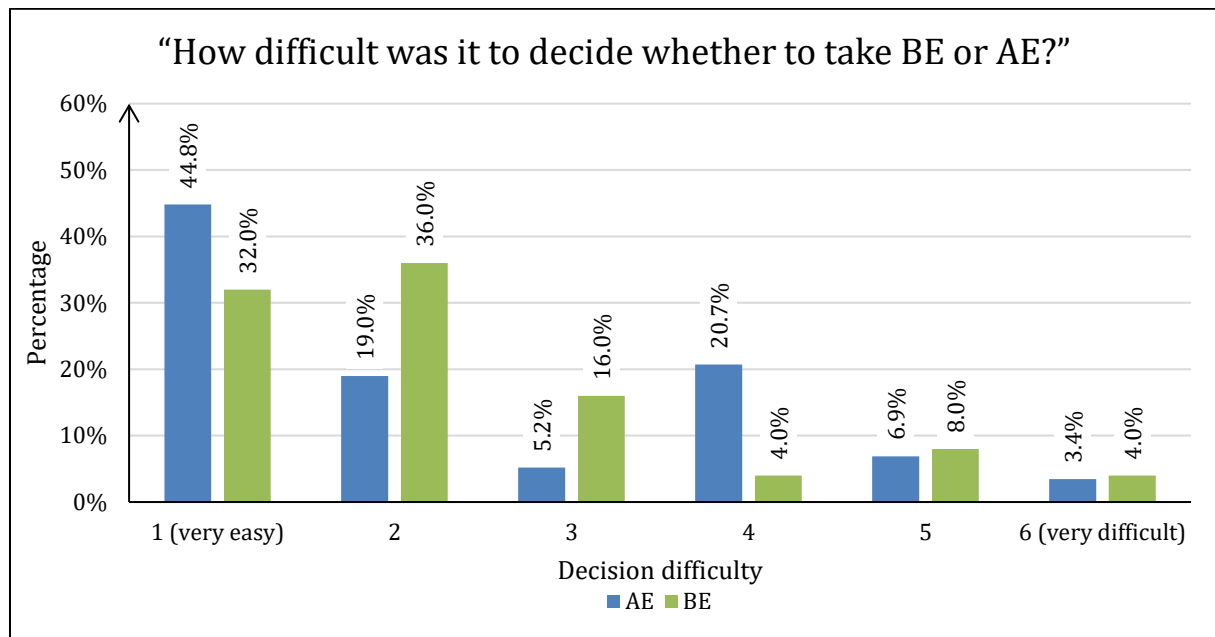
4.2 Other models

The questionnaire also sought to explore participants' wish to learn a model accent other than BE or AE. Therefore, the respondents were asked whether the department should offer courses focusing on other accents. 31.3% (26 respondents) would welcome an expanded offer, while 25.3% (21 respondents) said they would not be interested. 43.4% (36 respondents) were not sure about their interest.

When asked to detail their preference, participants overwhelmingly opted for Australian English (45%), followed by ELF (14%) (a definition of ELF was not given), Scottish (12%), and Irish (11%), as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3: Other model accents

"Which other model accents should be offered?"

- Other 11%
- Irish English 11%
- Scottish English 12%
- ELF 14%
- Mid-Atlantic 2%
- South African English 4%
- Indian English 1%
- Australian English 45%

4.3 Reasons for choosing a particular model accent

When it comes to reasons for choosing BE or AE for PPOCS 1, the overwhelming majority of AE participants attributed this decision to their media viewing habits. As can be seen in Figure 4, 97% subscribed to the statement "I watch a lot of American movies/series". Conversely, this factor was not nearly as decisive for the BE participants. Only 55% of the BE students claimed to watch British movies/series. Instead, BE participants considered their exposure to BE at school to be their prime decision-making factors: 72% felt that they already sounded "more British" and that their teacher at school had a British accent. On the other hand, only 47% of AE participants indicated that their teachers in school were the reason for picking AE. While participants showed roughly similar levels of affiliation to their target culture (53% for AE vs. 59% for BE), there was a marked difference in the time actually spent in the respective country. 62% spent time in the UK and only 30% spent time in the US. In essence, BE participants seem to be influenced by real-life contact with the target language and culture, most notably through their teachers at school, and AE participants generally seem to be influenced more by media exposure.

Figure 4: Reasons for choosing a model accent

Main reasons for choosing BE or AE
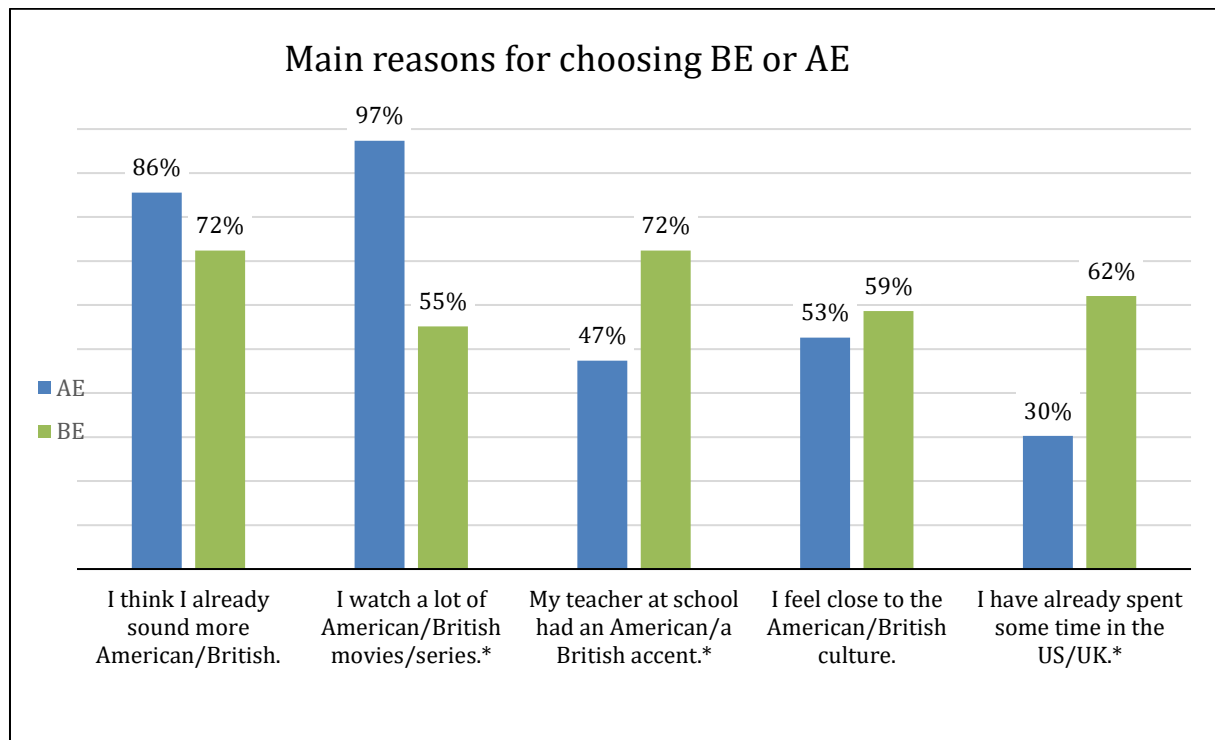
* = significant differences (Mann-Whitney U-Test/ p ≤ 0.5)

4.4 Trends

In order to address the fourth research question, data was requested from the university administration about the number of PPOCS 1 courses offered in the last three decades. The decision of how many parallel courses of what type (AE or BE) are on offer is usually made by the head of the study programme in response to demand expressed by the students during the registration period. A maximum number of 25 students are admitted to a course.

Figure 5 shows the development of the two strands (i.e. BE and AE PPOCS 1) from the winter semester 1994 to the winter semester 2021. At the beginning of the period under review, the English department offered 2 sections of AE PPOCS 1 and twice as many BE PPOCS 1, namely 4. 20 years later, in the winter semester 2014/15, the same number of courses for BE and AE (i.e. 4) were offered. In the winter semester 2017 there were more AE courses offered (i.e. 4) than BE courses (i.e. 3). Since then, the demand for AE courses has continued to outnumber the demand for BE courses. Overall, a marked increase in the demand for AE in the last few years can be observed.

Figure 5: AE and BE PPOCS 1 courses offered at the English Department
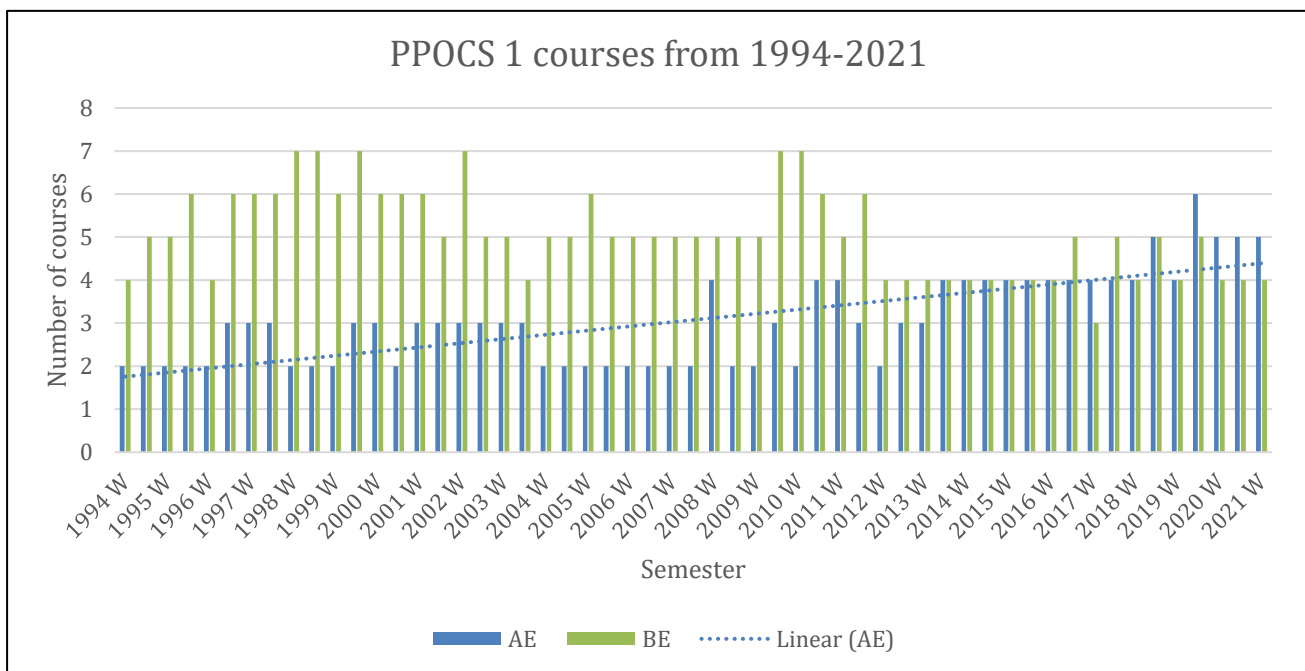
5. Implications

For pre-service EFL teachers, the decision which model accent to choose for their pronunciation class is likely to have implications for their future teaching practices. This may range from lesson planning to materials development (in particular the choice of coursebooks and audio materials) but may also affect language assessment and the kind of feedback they give their learners. Perhaps the main finding of this study is that the overwhelming majority of the respondents have a very clear idea what their model accent should be, namely a native-speaker variety (BE or AE). This view is also supported by students' clear preference for another native speaker variety - Australian English - if the department were to expand its range of PPOCS courses. The default option for those learners who are undecided is AE. This finding is further substantiated by current research suggesting that the long-standing tradition of British English as the most popular model accent in Europe is currently being challenged by a media-related surge in American English. While no more than a decade ago, British English - often through videos or sound clips from the BBC - was frequently heard in many European classrooms as the main source of L1 input, this does not seem to be the case any longer. The advent of streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime or Disney Plus, has fueled the ubiquity of American English, which has found its way into many European homes and classrooms alike. This means that while many experienced EFL teachers in today's classrooms aimed at a British English accent during their university education, they increasingly find their learners being socialized in American English. This may lead to a marked discrepancy between what is taught in class and what is learned outside class.

Our research also shows that in gradual steps the increased exposure to American English outside the classroom is also reflected in choices pre-service teachers make regarding their own model accent. Undoubtedly, EFL pedagogy will have to grapple with the consequences of this development in terms of teacher education but also materials design. Most certainly, pre-service teachers need to be made aware of this changing scene and the fact that their students' accent may not be the accent they themselves learned at university. Perhaps it is

also time to address more profound questions in teacher education. Is it still appropriate and useful for pre-service teachers to study one single model accent? What kind of knowledge about pronunciation does an EFL teacher in the 21ˢᵗ century need to deal with an increasingly heterogeneous student population? These are pertinent questions which will be investigated more closely in the next phase of our project.

When choosing a model accent, remember that

- BE and AE are generally the most popular pronunciation models for EFL learners.
- your students will increasingly bring an American accent into the classroom.
- the accent you choose will most likely have an effect on your students' pronunciation.
- your students will have learned English as much "outside the classroom" as they did "inside the classroom".

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