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SERBIAN EFL LEARNERS' PREFERENCES REGARDING STANDARD PRONUNCIATION MODELS¹

Abstract: This paper observes Serbian EFL students' attitudes to standard models of pronunciation such as General American (GA) and Southern British Standard (SBS). Previous research on this issue disclosed learners' overall inclination towards SBS as the preferred English variety. The aim of this research was to test whether Serbian students still hold such views, or whether American variety is on its way to replacing British English and becoming the eminent reference accent for pronunciation learning. Another aim was to observe the underlying reasons for learners' pronunciation preferences. The data was collected using a direct method, i.e. a written questionnaire. The respondents were 85 English-major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac. The analysis showed that the accuracy of pronunciation remains a high-priority goal since 85% of the respondents reported on native-like accent being their ultimate objective. However, unlike previous attitudinal studies, this research revealed learners' higher preference for GA. Such preference is to be expected since the respondents' self-reported exposure to this particular variety was much higher compared to their self-reported exposure to SBS.

Keywords: language attitudes, pronunciation model, General American, Southern British Standard.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contexts where English is learned as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL), the question as to which pronunciation model² aligns more closely with the overall aim of pronunciation teaching remains unanswered. There are, in fact, strong reasons to believe that it may be more feasible to adhere to the standard

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² The term *model* is used here to describe "pronunciation characteristics of the language a teacher presents to learners in the classroom" (Kelly 2001: 14).

models of pronunciation. Still, provided that we take this stance, we are left with another probing question – which standard model do we refer to, precisely? Researchers generally accept that Standard British and Standard American variety are the two varieties studied by most foreign learners (Algeo 2006: 1; Trudgill, Hannah 2008: 6). The term *Standard English* denotes a variety³ of the English language that has been codified, and is, therefore, widely used in dictionaries, handbooks, and grammars (Biber et al. 1999: 18). It is the variety which is adopted by publishers, represented in the media, and encouraged in classrooms (Bussmann 1999: 1117; Biber et al. 1999: 18). Several studies have previously demonstrated that Standard English varieties generally enjoy greater prestige among native speakers (NS) (Wells 1982a: 34). Such varieties are also widely regarded as more desirable given the fact that they tend to be associated with the better-educated society members (Crystal 2008: 404). Since standard varieties presumably have this privilege of occurrence in the eyes of the native English speakers, it is not surprising that many non-native learners and teachers do not seem to hold different views.

Still, in EFL contexts, the decision to teach standard models of pronunciation, specifically *Southern British Standard* (SBS)⁴ and *General American* (GA)⁵, is not necessarily rooted in language ideologies and social preferences. Rather, there are more practical reasons. The overall objective is to avoid any comprehension problems which might arise when EFL students are faced with native accented speech (Dimitrova, Chernogorova 2012: 207). Moreover, GA and SBS are understood by all NSs, they are codified for teaching purposes, pedagogically tested, and are, in fact, the language of the media (Ibid.: 209). More importantly, they are the reference accents for nearly all teaching materials on English pronunciation, not only in the UK and the US, but also internationally (Ashby 2011: 11; Dimitrova, Chernogorova 2012: 209). These, as well as some other factors which will be more thoroughly explored in the following sections, are the primary reasons why native pronunciation models, such as SBS and GA, have been widely advocated.

However, it is important to mention that not all researchers regard Standard English accents as being suitable for EFL classrooms. In fact, pronunciation models such as GA or SBS are, at times, rated less favorably. This is primarily because EFL students often fail to attain native-like pronunciation. That, in particular, has led scholars to believe that some sort of neutral, simplified, and more universal

³ In this paper, the term *variety* will be used synonymously with the term *accent*. Namely, we choose to observe only the spoken language, i.e. pronunciation.

⁴ Recently the term *Southern British Standard* (SBS) has been used to refer to the Standard British model of pronunciation (Brooks 2015: 13). SBS is nowadays considered to be a more politically correct term, even though some scholars still prefer using the widely known label RP (Čubrović 2004: 40). Another commonly used term is *Standard Southern British English* (SSBE) (Carr 2008: 9).

⁵ General American (GA) is an umbrella term for the majority of American accents that do not show marked regional characteristics, unlike, for example, the Southern US accent (Wells 1982b: 470).

pronunciation variety might be a more realistic goal (Jenkins 1998: 120). More specifically, it is believed that EFL learners might benefit more from being exposed to varieties such as *Euro-English*, *International English*, *World Englishes*, or nowadays most commonly cited non-standard variety – *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) (Jenkins 2006; Bugarski 2004; Ošmjanski 2016a; 2016b).⁶ This is simply because, in EFL contexts, English is no longer learned in order to communicate with NSs (Jenkins 1998: 119). Instead, EFL students are more likely to encounter speakers of other non-standard varieties (Ibid.). This idea was what originally inspired the development of ELF which is defined as “a contact language used only among non-mother tongue speakers” (Jenkins 2006: 160). Therefore, the proponents of ELF believe learners' main objective should not be to approximate any standard model of pronunciation, since, as they claim, that might only dishearten the learners (Jenkins 1998: 124; Derwing, Munro 2005: 384). Instead, these scholars believe it is necessary to shift the focus from teaching standard varieties to teaching something more attainable, specifically in terms of pronunciation.

Nevertheless, there are several issues when it comes to teaching non-standard varieties such as ELF. Firstly, there is still no detailed linguistic description of ELF (Ošmjanski 2016b: 150), or other non-standard varieties mentioned here (Bugarski 2004: 9). This presents some practical difficulties when it comes to designing teaching materials. It proves problematic, more so perhaps, when evaluating students' progress. The plurality of linguistic features, which ELF and other non-standard varieties seem to promote, might also make it difficult to distinguish between local variation and errors (Jenkins 2006). Lastly, when we come to look at the results of some attitudinal studies concerning the EFL students' perception of English varieties, students' preference for native pronunciation models becomes even more evident. This notion will be examined more fully in the following sections, for the present, suffice it to say that non-standard models of pronunciation might not, in fact, be what EFL students truly wish to emulate.

In the hope of reaching a more amicable conclusion about the preferred pronunciation model in Serbian educational context, this paper will explore students' attitudes towards varieties such as GA and SBS. Our decision to focus on standard pronunciation models was motivated by the aforementioned advantages of using standard models as reference accents. Another reason is that Serbian students are more likely to be familiar with these accents since that is what they are generally exposed to in terms of their formal education. Thus, we assume that, if they do strive for native-like pronunciation, they will most likely gravitate towards these accents. At the same time, we wish to observe whether students still regard British English as their preferred variety, as some of the previous studies on pronunciation

⁶ The aim of this research was to closely inspect Serbian students' attitudes towards standard accents of English. Therefore, we were unable to provide an in-depth study of the non-standard varieties mentioned here. For a more comprehensive review see Jenkins (1998; 2006) and Ošmjanski (2016a).

preferences have indicated (Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019: 72; Grubor et al. 2008: 126). Before we do so, it is necessary, however, to note some of the most common methods for conducting an attitudinal research. Some of these methods and approaches will be employed in this research as well.

2. DIRECT AND INDIRECT ASSESSMENT OF ATTITUDES

There are linguists (e.g. Hassan 2018) who believe that acquiring a native accent is plausible provided that conditions such as: high motivation, a strong desire to sound native, and good linguistic aptitude are met. Except for these conditions, the attained proficiency is believed to depend heavily on positive attitudes⁷ towards a variety (Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997: 115). It is important to note that having a positive attitude towards a specific variety does not, in itself, guarantee success in terms of mastering it. Nevertheless, positive attitudes most certainly govern students' choice as to which pronunciation model they wish to attain. That is why nearly all the studies on pronunciation preferences are, in fact, attitudinal studies which aim at eliciting learners' direct or indirect responses to different models of pronunciation.

In a direct approach, subjects are either interviewed or asked to complete a questionnaire with directly posed questions about their opinion regarding a certain variety (Coupland, Bishop 2007: 75; Stojić 2017: 311). This approach can yield concrete results provided that the respondents are truly familiar with the accent they are evaluating. Direct assessment of attitudes can also limit the chances of misidentification and is particularly useful when analyzing specific reasons underlying the respondents' preference for a certain pronunciation model.

In a more indirect approach, subjects are first presented with speech samples of various English accents. They are then asked to rate those samples in terms of prestige or social attractiveness (Coupland, Bishop 2007: 74; Pilus 2013: 145–146). When it comes to indirect assessment of attitudes, there are two methods which are commonly used so as to gather information about learners' responses to different varieties. These are the verbal-guise and matched-guise technique (Carrie 2017). The verbal-guise technique employs different speakers to represent different speech varieties, whereas the matched-guise technique employs only one speaker to represent multiple varieties (Carrie, McKenzie 2017: 316). Both verbal-guise and matched-guise tasks are usually accompanied by an interview or a written questionnaire (Evans 2005: 240). In the latter, subjects are presented with a list of attributes and are asked to indicate to what degree those attributes apply to the speech sam-

⁷ Attitudes are mental constructs which are shaped by our experience. They are a psychological tendency in that they predispose us to either favorable or unfavorable reactions to certain situations, people, or objects. This suggests that attitudes cannot be neutral by definition (Dalton-Puffer 1997: 115–118; Stojić 2017: 310).

ples they hear, i.e. to the speakers whose speech they are rating (Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997: 118). The purpose of such tasks is to elicit qualitative comments so as to gain a better insight into the subjects' pronunciation evaluations. Ideally, indirect approaches can uncover more deeply held beliefs and stereotypes regarding accents (Coupland, Bishop 2007: 75). Nevertheless, cross-validation of results often requires a combination of both direct and indirect approaches (Stojić 2017: 311).

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON PRONUNCIATION PREFERENCES

Recent studies on accent preferences (e.g. Pilus 2013; Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997; Wong 2018; Paunović 2009) have mostly focused on exploring the attitudes of both teachers and learners towards Standard British, Standard American, as well as some localized English accents, using the verbal-guise experiment. Interestingly enough, studies report different findings in terms of whether or not non-standard accents are negatively evaluated. Generally, both learners and teachers tend to rate standard varieties, especially SBS, higher than their localized variety (Carrie 2017; Carrie, McKenzie 2017; Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997; Wong 2018; Evans 2005; Henderson et al. 2012; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019). The negative evaluation of localized English varieties is often motivated by learners' belief that the heavily accented speech might confuse the hearer (Wong 2018: 180). On the other hand, some of the most commonly cited reasons for preferring the British accent are: greater familiarity with the model since it was taught at school and greater ease in understanding, as well as speaking British English (Pilus 2013: 150). Of course, this is not to say that there are no studies that advocate accented speech of non-native speakers (NNS). Studies alike usually report on learners' desire to retain an accent so as to communicate their identity to others (Ibid.). Even so, scholars like Wong (2018: 177) emphasize how very few studies actually show that English learners would not like to speak like natives. Although some scholars might be critical of such aspirations, native accent seems to remain a high-priority goal according to most research findings.

It appears that learners are strongly influenced by the accents they hear around them, particularly those accents which they hear in their classrooms. The fact that pronunciation models that served as reference accents in EFL classrooms are typically rated higher was corroborated in a research carried out by Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997). In this research, the authors tested the attitudes of 132 university students of English in Austria to both native (RP and GA) and non-native English varieties (Austrian English). The findings led the authors (Ibid.: 120) to conclude that the learners' preference for British English can partly be explained by the geographical closeness of the British Isles to Austria. Because of the geographical closeness, the authors hypothesized that their learners might have greater

chances of encountering and thus interacting with the speakers of that particular variety. It is presumably this which then leads to the greater familiarity with the British accent and the learners' desire to imitate it.

However, the proximity might not always be strictly geographical. Rather, it might also be psychological due to the prominence of a specific culture (mostly through media) (Carrie, McKenzie 2017: 328). Familiarity with the target accent, which seems to be the consequence of the aforementioned proximity, is what determines students' ability to correctly identify diverse accents (Flege 1984: 704). Namely, in a recent study, Carrie and McKenzie (2017: 316) investigated the Spanish learners' (N = 71) ability to correctly identify speakers of RP and GA. They (Ibid.: 330) found that recognition rates correlate with the previous exposure to a variety (either through education or through media). It is precisely this psychological closeness which might explain why even those learners that come from countries which are geographically far from the native English speaking countries (like the UK, the USA, Canada, etc.) are occasionally capable of approximating their pronunciation to the native model.

We must not overlook the fact that learners sometimes fail to correctly identify English accents. This can, of course, greatly affect the pronunciation evaluation. Namely, a number of recent studies (Wong 2018; Carrie, McKenzie 2017) disclosed learners' inability to correctly identify accents such as Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, American and British English. Wong's (2018: 180) analysis, for instance, showed rather poor accent recognition rates (14%), despite the subjects' high preference for British English, and the fact that they labeled their own accent as British. On the other hand, Carrie and McKenzie's (2017: 313) research indicated that whenever GA speakers were wrongly identified as RP speakers, they were rated higher regarding social status. Clearly, when analyzing learners' attitudes to specific accents, misidentification can bring forth imprecise results concerning pronunciation judgments. This is why some researchers prefer using a more direct approach, i.e. they prefer using direct-method questionnaires without employing the verbal guises. Another way to ensure the validity of results is to opt for combining direct and indirect methods.

In the Serbian educational context, the circumstances do not differ greatly from those just mentioned. Namely, the purpose of nearly every conducted attitudinal research was to disclose the most widely used and preferred accent in Serbian classrooms, with standard accents remaining the prime focus. Few studies disclosed subjects' preference for SBS (Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019: 72; Grubor et al. 2008: 126). However, what is interesting is that a number of papers (Grubor et al. 2008; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Stojić 2017; Čubrović, Bjelaković 2020) reported on respondents' tendency to mix Standard English varieties (SBS and GA). Authors like Grubor and Hinić (2011: 299) are of the opinion that this occurrence

stems from the bivalent influence – subjects being exposed to SBS⁸ through education, and to GA through the media. Yet, the authors (Ibid.: 303) do take into account that the respondents' decision to label their accent as a “mix” variety might be the result of a general tendency to pick a more neutral option (mix variety) over two extremes (GA and SBS). The main conclusion of Grubor and Hinić's (Ibid.: 306) research was that SBS keeps its prevalence in the educational context, while GA proves to be more dominant in informal situations.

Still, the increasing dominance of American English in various domains is beginning to, or rather, has already overshadowed students' exposure to SBS. Students in EFL contexts no longer depend solely on the input they receive in their classrooms. To illustrate this more clearly, Stojić (2017) conducted a comparative study of Serbian first-year students' overt attitudes to Standard American and Standard British English. The author (Ibid.: 312) wished to see whether the two generations of students, separated by the span of 19 years, expressed different attitudes to the accents in question. The results of the more recent survey (2016) disclosed a much higher use of the American accent (61.7%) among the students, compared to the earlier (1997) study where only 15.8% of the respondents claimed to be using the American variety (Ibid.: 312). Still, nearly all respondents (around 90%) in both studies reported that “the best” English is, in fact, British English (Ibid.: 318). The advance of GA among Serbian students was confirmed in yet another recent study conducted by Čubrović and Bjelaković (2020). As discussed previously, the growing use of GA was believed to be the result of the students' greater exposure to this variety, mostly due to the worldwide popularity of American pop culture or the Internet (Ibid.: 149).

The remaining sections of this paper will focus on analyzing pronunciation preferences of Serbian EFL learners in the hopes of making a modest contribution to the previous research on this topic. We primarily wish to observe the potential change in the learners' growing fondness for GA and to uncover the possible reasons for such fondness. By understanding our students' pronunciation goals, we are one step closer to finding ways to tailor the materials and the overall pronunciation teaching practice more to our students' liking, and by doing so, we can improve our students' chances of success.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The empirical part of this study focused on the following research questions:

- What is the preferred pronunciation model in Serbian classrooms?

⁸ In their paper, Grubor and Hinić (2011: 301) used the label *RP* for Standard British English.

- What are the underlying reasons for students' preference for a specific accent?
- Is there a correlation between the students' accent preference and the overall pronunciation teaching practice?

4.2. PARTICIPANTS

Attitudinal studies concerning pronunciation preferences are usually conducted with university students as respondents. This is because attitudes are typically formed in adolescence and are believed to remain relatively consistent throughout life (Carrie 2017: 434; Kovačević 2004: 38). Therefore, the participants in this study were English-major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac. All the respondents were native Serbian speakers. The total sample size consisted of 85 students, with a mean age of 21.04. There was, however, a noticeable imbalance in the sample in terms of gender distribution. Namely, more women (N = 64) volunteered for the survey than men (N = 21). The number of respondents also varied according to the level of undergraduate study. More specifically, there were 9 first-year students, 47 second-year students, 22 third-year students and 7 fourth-year students who took part in the survey. Ideally, the number of respondents should be equal across categories like age and the level of study. However, this condition could not be met given that the participation in the research was voluntary. Every student who completed the questionnaire was accepted as a respondent, which led to certain groups (like the first-year and the fourth-year students) being under-represented in the sample. However, we did not want to disregard these groups since analyzing possible differences in pronunciation tendencies across variables like sex or the educational level was not our primary goal.

4.3. INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURE

The data for the present study were collected using a direct-method questionnaire which was designed and distributed via e-mail to English-major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac. The students responded to the questionnaire anonymously. The survey period lasted from December 2020 until June 2021, during which a total number of 85 completed questionnaires was obtained. Before completing the questionnaire, the subjects were informed about the goals and the methodology of the ongoing study and they voluntarily agreed to participate in the research.

The questionnaire comprised a total of 18 questions. Since most of the questions were in multiple choice format, the questionnaire took less than 10 minutes to complete. Three supplementary questions (Q1–Q3) were posed so as to gather the

students' demographic details (age, gender and the level of undergraduate study). The following 7 questions (Q4–Q10) examined students' exposure to English language and its varieties, both institutionally and outside of the educational context. More specifically, questions 4–6 elicited information on the respondents' overall exposure to English. Those questions were formulated as follows:

Q4: How old were you when you first started learning English?

Q5: Did you take any private English lessons as a child? If yes, for how long?

Q6: What language did your teachers mostly use during your English classes?

In Question 6, students could choose between three options: “English”, “Serbian” or “Both”, while the previous two questions were open-ended. In Question 7, students were asked to report on the English variety their professors mostly used in their elementary school, high school and college. Four answers were offered here: “SBS”, “GA”, “Mix (SBS and GA)”⁹ and “Other”¹⁰. This question was posed since the previous studies (Pilus 2013; Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997) revealed that students' decision to choose a certain variety is often motivated by the fact that that particular variety was taught at school. Question 8 asked the students whether their teachers tolerated the use of various English accents, or whether they persisted in using one particular variety. The goal of this question was to see if much of the students' attitudes towards English varieties actually came from their teachers, i.e. whether the teachers perhaps imposed their own beliefs and preferences upon their students. Conversely, Questions 9 and 10 examined the students' exposure to English accents in less formal settings. We chose to observe these two types of exposure (formal and informal) separately, since previous research (e.g. Grubor, Hinić 2011) reported on different accents being prevalent in different domains. Therefore, in Question 9, the students were asked if they had any chance to travel to an English-speaking country, while Question 10 dealt with the students' exposure to different English varieties through media. In the latter, the students were presented with the following options: “SBS”, “GA”, “Both SBS and GA”, and “Other”.

In order to observe our students' accent goals as well as their stance on the acquisition of a native-like accent, we presented them with the following set of questions (questions 11–16):

⁹ “Mix” variety was offered as a choice since a number of previous studies (Grubor et al. 2008; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Stojić 2017; Čubrović, Bjelaković 2020) reported how, instead of staying true to the chosen variety, Serbian students tend to mix Standard English accents. This option was offered because we wanted to observe whether choosing this particular variety was perhaps a conscious decision.

¹⁰ For several questions, the answer “Other” was offered as an option so that the respondents could specify different reasons or alternatives that were excluded from the given set of answers.

Q11: Are you able to differentiate between various pronunciations of English (e.g. American, British, Australian, Canadian, etc.)?

Q12: What do you strive for in terms of your pronunciation?

Q13: Do you think a native-like accent is fully attainable by EFL students?

Q14: As an EFL student, do you think it is important to adhere to the standard pronunciation models (like SBS and GA), as opposed to non-standard varieties?

Q15: Which English variety do you use?

Q16: When it comes to choosing an English variety, which factor has mostly influenced your choice?

Question 11 was asked in order to inspect the students' self reported ability to identify different English accents before asking them to label their own pronunciation. The options presented here were: "Yes", "Sometimes" and "No". In Question 12, we wished to see whether a native-like pronunciation is, in fact, a high-priority goal for our students. Hence, the suggested answers were: "A native-like pronunciation", "A native-like pronunciation with little mother tongue interference", or "Serbian English". Questions 13 and 14 correlated with Question 12 in that we hypothesized that those students who believed native-like accent was both an achievable and a desirable goal would consequently wish to attain it. Since the aim of this research was to observe students' preference for either SBS or GA, the following set of options was offered in Question 15: "SBS", "GA", "A mix (SBS and GA)", "Serbian English", and "Other". Question 16 aimed at disclosing some of the possible reasons underlying the students' accent preferences. This question was purposefully posed directly in order to gain insight into what our students thought the main reason for their pronunciation model selection was. The students could choose here between options such as: "Greater exposure to the variety through media", "It is easier to understand/speak that variety", "The variety was predominantly taught at school/university", "Greater chances of interacting with the speakers of that variety" or "Other".

In Question 17, the students were asked: "Which variety do you find more prestigious?", and the options were: "SBS", "GA" and "They are equally prestigious". The purpose of asking this question was to observe whether the growing use of GA among Serbian students could be attributed to the possibly greater, or at least, equal prestige of GA compared to SBS. Lastly, in Question 18, the students were asked: "Which variety should be used as a model for pronunciation teaching?". The set of possible answers included options like "SBS", "GA" and "Both". This question aimed at revealing the students' overt opinion about the accent most suitable for Serbian EFL classrooms. Namely, we wanted to see whether our students thought the accent similar to their own was the most suitable model for pronunciation teaching, as some previous studies have indicated (Carrie, McKenzie 2017: 314).

4.4. DATA ANALYSIS

The respondents' answers to the open-ended questions were qualitatively elaborated on, while the data analysis for the multiple-choice questions included counting percentage scores.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, we could say our students are relatively experienced English learners in that the mean value for the age when the English learning process commenced was 6.68. This indicates that even the youngest respondents in the sample spent at least 12 years learning English institutionally. Yet, only 25% of our students reported taking additional English lessons. Those who did take private lessons, spent on average 5.5 years attending private schools. However, concerning the language their teachers mainly used in class, 17% of our examinees said their teachers mostly used Serbian, 28% said English, while the majority of our respondents (55%) mentioned their teachers used both languages. This has several consequences for the students. The most important one is that using the learners' mother tongue significantly decreases their exposure to the target language. This happens to be problematic since the context of learning English as a foreign language already implies limited exposure to the target language because that is not the language used for day-to-day communication.

When asked to point out the English variety their teachers predominantly used, 16% of our subjects stated their teachers used SBS, 55% answered GA, whereas 29% of our students revealed that their teachers used a mix of these two standard varieties. These results are inconsistent with the results obtained from the previous studies (Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Grubor et al. 2008) which disclosed students' higher exposure to SBS in the educational context. In fact, nearly all of the teaching materials that are available to Serbian teachers and students have British English as the reference accent (Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2018: 72). This is why higher rates for GA presented here appear to be quite unexpected. It is possible, though, that the teachers recognized their students' tendencies and have already taken steps in order to approximate the pronunciation teaching model more to their students' liking, despite the majority of the materials being based on the British variant.

What was even more interesting was that 93% of our subjects mentioned that their teachers tolerated the use of different English accents in class. The remaining 7% of our respondents, who claimed that their teachers insisted on using only one variety, were divided on this point. That is, half of the students reported on their teachers using GA, while the other half answered that their teachers insisted

on using SBS. Still, high rates for the teachers' reported accent variation tolerance, excluded the possibility of a certain model being made compulsory.

The percentage of those who had a chance to visit an English-speaking country was quite low. That is, only 5% of our students visited either the USA or the UK. Although the majority of our students were not exposed to any standard English variety directly, their exposure to the observed varieties via the Internet, television, music, gaming, etc., was significant. Namely, 7% of the respondents said they were mostly exposed to online content which was in British English, 74% opted for American English, while 19% reported equal exposure to these standard varieties. It is evident that America has acquired superiority in areas such as technology, commerce, popular culture, science, etc. (Drljača Margić 2011: 65). It is precisely this growing dominance in nearly every sphere of life that has enabled the rapid spread of American English, which, we believe, led to the results presented here. The students were also asked about their ability to successfully identify different English accents. Here, up to 82% of our subjects believed they could successfully differentiate between various accents. This could be explained, in part, by the previously mentioned psychological proximity. More specifically, because of the diverse content students are exposed to via the Internet, the chances of familiarizing themselves with different English varieties are stronger than ever. What is more, when it comes to accents such as GA and SBS, a significant level of familiarity is likely due to the students' greater exposure to these variants through teaching materials (Carrie 2017: 432). Yet, the results concerning the learners' ability to identify English varieties are self-reported. In order to corroborate them, it would be best to conduct additional indirect assessment, i.e. to employ the verbal guises.

In questions regarding our students' pronunciation goals as well as their stance on the importance of being true to the standard models, the results demonstrate that 85% of our learners wish to attain a native-like accent. Almost the same percentage (80%) of students supposedly believe this is an achievable goal, while 63% of our learners think adhering to the standard models is, in fact, important. The remaining 15% of our examinees want to speak a native-like accent with little mother tongue interference. Interestingly enough, there were no students who opted for the localized variety, i.e. Serbian English as their goal. Such results are consistent with the findings of several previous studies (Carrie 2017; Carrie, McKenzie 2017; Dalton-Puffer et al. 1997; Wong 2018; Evans 2005; Henderson et al. 2012; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019) which disclosed rather poor ratings for non-native varieties.

Nevertheless, it appears that there are slight changes concerning the level of prestige students attribute to standard accents like SBS and GA. Previous research on this issue disclosed higher ratings for SBS in terms of social status. The results obtained here demonstrate that SBS remains the prestigious variety since 58% of our respondents thought so. Although only 3% of our students believed GA was more prestigious, 38% said both accents were equal in this respect. Yet, it does

not appear that the level of prestige was what motivated the students' choice of a specific variety. That is, despite the higher rates for SBS regarding prestige, the majority of our respondents (64%) labeled their own accent as American. Only 2% of students labeled their accent as SBS, 4% reported on speaking Serbian English, and the remaining 30% believed they spoke a mix of SBS and GA. It appears that the issue of mixing standard varieties, which is a recurring issue according to a number of studies (Grubor et al. 2008; Grubor, Hinić 2011; Stojić 2017; Čubrović, Bjelaković 2020), is something that students themselves are aware of.

According to our sample of students, the most common reason for choosing a particular variety was greater exposure to it through the media (62%). Then followed reasons such as "it is easier to speak/understand that variety" (14%), "the variety was taught at school" (11%), and "greater chances of interacting with speakers of that variety" (7%). For some (2%), all these reasons contributed to their choice of the pronunciation model. There were, however, students (4%) who opted for the answer "Other". Those were mostly students who described their pronunciation as SBS. They provided the following reasons for their choice: "I like the sound, the melody of SBS", "SBS just sounds a bit better", "I find SBS more sophisticated", "I am interested in British history, I respect countries with long tradition and rich history".

Though the majority of our students' labeled their pronunciation as GA, when asked about the best pronunciation model for pronunciation teaching, 18% of students opted for SBS, the same percentage (18%) chose GA, whereas most of our students (64%) chose the option "Both". Thus, rather than choosing their preferred variety as the best variety for pronunciation teaching, our students largely expressed tolerance for pronunciation variation.

As can be seen in the above results, there are reasons to believe that students' exposure to a certain variety is most likely what governs their pronunciation choice. The more the students are exposed to a specific variety, the greater their familiarity with that variety and their motivation to adopt it. It is, however, important to note that it is nearly impossible to single out the exact factor which governs the students' pronunciation model selection with utmost certainty. Rather, we should perhaps speak of a combination of diverse factors, where one, or most likely several factors, might prevail in a given context.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study indicate an important change concerning Serbian EFL students' latest preferences regarding Standard English varieties. Namely, the conducted research corroborated the findings of a few recent attitudinal surveys (Stojić 2017; Čubrović, Bjelaković 2020) which disclosed learners' greater inclination towards GA as opposed to SBS. This change is significant since it disclosed

a mismatch between students' preferred reference model on the one hand, and the materials used for pronunciation teaching on the other. More specifically, most, if not all, teaching materials available to Serbian learners have SBS as their reference accent (Jerotijević Tišma, Karavesović 2019; Čubrović, Bjelaković 2020). This does not, however, correlate with the reported accent preferences presented in this paper. Hence, including more materials on American pronunciation presents itself as a necessity, since such practice aligns more closely with our students' pronunciation goals. Of course, this is not to say that we believe GA should have superiority over SBS, or any other variety for that matter, nor that it is to be regarded as the norm. Rather, we look at it in the same sense as some other scholars have previously indicated – as a “point of reference”, i.e. a “model for guidance” (Jenkins 1998: 124). EFL students should be given the chance to familiarize themselves with various native and non-native English varieties. Therefore, exposing students to only one particular variety brings us one step away from working towards that goal. We should, however, be aware of the fact that the results presented here might differ greatly from those obtained by analyzing the attitudes of learners who do not study English for academic purposes. Here, the focus was on those learners who are training to be English teachers. Slightly greater demands are placed on such learners since they are more likely to give public presentations or lectures, attend seminars and international conferences, and perhaps even try to enter some English-speaking colleges (Morley 1991: 492–493). This is why we should respect the students' desire to try to approximate the native model, if they wish to do so, and provide them with the necessary means that can help them realize their goal. We should, as some scholars would say, enable our students “not just to survive, but to succeed” (Ibid.: 489).

Lastly, we must note that analyzing students' *actual* pronunciation would require a different method from the one presented in this study. Questionnaires cannot, for that matter, elicit reliable information. The same applies to using assessment sheets. This is because the students' estimation of their own pronunciation might not necessarily reflect their actual linguistic behavior (Stojić 2017: 313). The data presented here should be taken more as an indicator of students' aspirations, rather than their actual performance. A more detailed acoustic analysis is needed in order to confirm that students' pronunciation is truly in accordance with their reported preferences.

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НАКЛОНОСТ СРПСКИХ СТУДЕНАТА ПРЕМА ЈЕДНОМ ОД СТАНДАРДНИХ ИЗГОВОРНИХ МОДЕЛА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА

Резиме: Предмет овог рада јесу ставови српских студената према стандардним изговорним моделима енглеског језика попут општеамеричког варијетета и јужног британског стандарда. Претходна истраживања на ову тему указала су на већу наклоност српских студената према британском варијетету. Циљ овог истраживања био је преиспитати улогу британског акцента као водећег референтног модела за потребе наставе изговора, као и потенцијалне разлоге због којих се студенти опредељују за одређени варијетет. Као мерни инструмент, у истраживању је коришћен упитник. Испитаници су били студенти англистике Филолошко-уметничког факултета Универзитета у Крагујевцу. Анализом ставова испитаника дошло се до закључка да већина студената (85%) тежи да достигне ниво компетенције изворног говорника. Међутим, за разлику од претходних истраживања, у овом истраживању примећена је већа наклоност студената према општеамеричком изговорном моделу. Овакав резултат није изненађујућ с обзиром на чињеницу да је изложеност испитаника америчком варијетету протеклих година знатно већа у поређењу са њиховом изложеношћу јужном британском стандарду.

Кључне речи: ставови, изговорни модел, општеамерички варијетет, јужни британски стандард.