



EFL Pronunciation Instruction: Czech vs Slovak EFL Students' Perceptions

Rastislav Metruk

Faculty of Education, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic & Faculty of Education, Trnava University, Slovakia, rastislav.metruk@truni.sk & rastislav.metruk@osu.cz

This study examines the perceptions of Czech and Slovak EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students regarding pronunciation instruction, highlighting its crucial role in effective communication and successful language learning. The primary aim of this paper is to investigate how the research participants, comprising 103 Czech and Slovak university EFL students, perceive EFL pronunciation-related issues and whether there is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of the two groups. The research indicates that while pronunciation is regarded as essential and participants feel confident in their own pronunciation, it often remains an overlooked area in EFL instruction. Furthermore, eleven independent sample t-tests revealed statistically significant differences in three questionnaire statements: the desire to sound as close to a native speaker as possible, confidence in one's pronunciation, and the need for more time for pronunciation instruction, indicating distinctions between the Czech and Slovak students. As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, this research emphasises the need to prioritise pronunciation in EFL curricula to enhance effective communication and comprehensive language proficiency among EFL learners.

Keywords: EFL pronunciation, pronunciation instruction, neglect of teaching pronunciation, Czech and Slovak EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The significance of EFL (English as a foreign language) pronunciation within instruction is emphasised by its vital role in effective communication (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Dunifa, 2023; Tareen et al., 2023; Zhang & AlSaqqaf, 2025) and successful language learning and acquisition. Numerous studies emphasise the importance of pronunciation in EFL instruction, indicating that learners often perceive their pronunciation as essential for expressing themselves clearly and interacting adequately. The vast majority of EFL learners rate pronunciation in English language, which can be regarded as a key subject in the realms of education (Cocca & Cocca, 2019), as highly important due to its direct impact on their communicative competence and confidence in communication (Almusharraf, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). This is particularly important for Czech and Slovak EFL learners due to the noticeable

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differences between these two Slavic languages and English (e.g., the absence of certain phonemes and significant variations in word stress patterns), which create unique language challenges for EFL learners.

Effective and reasonable pronunciation is not merely an individual aspect of language learning but rather a critical factor that influences broader educational outcomes. Poor pronunciation frequently leads to decreased self-esteem and social interaction skills among learners (Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021). It may hinder learners from fully engaging in conversations, leading to misunderstandings that negatively affect their willingness to communicate (Amalia et al., 2023). Furthermore, pronunciation issues can create barriers to both intelligibility and comprehensibility, highlighting the need for targeted instruction in this area (Pakpahan, 2023).

However, teaching EFL pronunciation can also be frequently neglected (Gilakjani et al., 2019; Kabir et al., 2022; Khasanah & Anggoro, 2022; Martin, 2020; Nagle, 2018; Rubio, 2024). This may be due to teachers possibly lacking sufficient technical knowledge about this language system (Scrivener, 2011), feeling uncertain about their own pronunciation (Baker, 2011), or facing time constraints (Martin, 2020). Sesma et al. (2022) also support this notion by observing that many EFL teachers either omit pronunciation training entirely or rely solely on repetition drills, partly due to a lack of experience with technology-enhanced pronunciation tools and time constraints. Nicolaidis and Mattheoudakis (2012) further highlight the imbalance in teaching priorities, where vocabulary receives greater focus than pronunciation. This can negatively impact learners' fluency and intelligibility. Tišma (2016) also provided evidence that teachers are often unaware of the full range of pronunciation challenges their students encounter, which limits the development of effective strategies to address these issues.

Moreover, it is emphasised that in terms of English pronunciation instruction, which is not an easy task (Lutfiani, 2017), EFL teachers must adopt diverse instructional strategies to improve learners' pronunciation. Explicit instruction in phonetics appears to be necessary, as many textbooks do not explicitly teach pronunciation, and those that do often seem monotonous, focusing primarily on drills and repetitions (Soradova, Kralova, & Birova, 2018). The application of varied teaching techniques, such as modelling and interactive practice, has been advocated as essential for addressing pronunciation challenges EFL learners face (Moedjito, 2017). EFL students respond best to pronunciation instruction that engages both segmental features (individual sounds – vowels and consonants) as well as suprasegmental features, such as intonation, rhythm, and stress (Espinoza et al., 2021).

As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021), the diversity of pronunciation among non-native speakers presents both challenges and opportunities for EFL learners and teachers. Pronunciation instruction must be flexible, especially in the 21st century, to accommodate varying accents and speech patterns while maintaining clarity and intelligibility, particularly in multicultural contexts where English functions as a common means of communication (Lim, 2016; Tsunemoto & McDonough, 2020).

In summary, pronunciation is a crucial component of EFL education that facilitates effective communication and fosters learner confidence. Focusing on pronunciation through explicit instruction, a variety of effective methodologies, and technological support is crucial for promoting successful language acquisition and developing communicative competence among EFL learners worldwide.

In examining the pronunciation challenges faced by Czech and Slovak learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), recent research elucidates various factors influencing their pronunciation development. One of the prominent themes is how EFL learners perceive English accents. Kráľová et al. investigated how Czech and Slovak students evaluate various English accents, recognising that EFL learners often struggle with identifying and perceiving not only their native dialects but also the English accents they encounter in interaction. This highlights a significant gap in acoustic and perceptual training, which can impede accurate pronunciation and communication in English (Kráľová et al., 2024).

Moreover, the longstanding tradition of EFL education in the Czech Republic encourages a tendency toward standardising pronunciation, which can overshadow learners' identities and individual pronunciation goals. Šimáčková and Podlipský (2018) emphasise that prevalent standards and ideologies in language instruction often neglect the intrinsic phonetic challenges specific to Czech learners, such as vowel accuracy and the assimilation of English sound patterns into their native language structures. This highlights the need for targeted instruction that addresses these specific pronunciation difficulties rather than strictly adhering to a perceived native model. (Šimáčková & Podlipský, 2018). There seems to be limited research comparing Czech and Slovak EFL learners' perceptions of EFL pronunciation; thus, this article aims to address this gap.

Segmental Features Vs Suprasegmental Features

Segmental features refer to individual sounds of a language, particularly consonants and vowels. These features are crucial for accurately articulating words and can significantly determine whether a speaker's message is understood. Moedjito (2016) emphasises that segmental features often precede teaching practices, particularly in environments where learners find these elements more straightforward to master, as they can be isolated and practised discretely.

However, research supports the claim that a balanced emphasis on segmental and suprasegmental features is necessary to improve learners' pronunciation skills. Extensive studies have shown that while segmental features are foundational for producing comprehensible speech, suprasegmental features often have a more profound influence on listener comprehension and communication success (Tergujeff, 2012; Bouchhioua, 2016; Saito, 2012). Saito's synthesis of relevant literature reveals that neglecting suprasegmental features can lead to misunderstandings, emphasising the fact that effective pronunciation instruction and training should integrate these aspects (Saito, 2012).

Nonetheless, certain studies suggest that categorising pronunciation instruction into segmental and suprasegmental features can sometimes be misleading, as both aspects

interact and cannot be learned separately (Moedjito, 2016; Yenkimaleki et al., 2022). It has been shown that holistic pronunciation approaches, which include segmental and suprasegmental training, lead to better listening comprehension than isolated training (Yenkimaleki et al., 2022). This effect indicates that learners gain more when instruction encompasses the interconnected nature of pronunciation elements, thereby enhancing their overall communicative competence in English (Dao et al., 2020; Rohmatin et al., 2023).

In summary, teaching segmental and suprasegmental features in EFL pronunciation involves more than merely sharing knowledge about sounds; it requires a dynamic interaction that can improve all aspects of language use, from speaking to listening. A comprehensive pronunciation curriculum that integrates these dimensions is essential for fostering effective communication skills in EFL learners.

Native-Like Accentness

The aspiration among many EFL learners to achieve native-like pronunciation is a phenomenon that has sparked interesting discussion within the field of EFL pronunciation instruction. Studies show that learners often view a native-like accent as a marker of fluency and social prestige (Almusharraf, 2021; Tale, 2023). This belief is reinforced by societal attitudes towards inner-circle English norms, which are increasingly contested within applied linguistics (Levis, 2005; Kang, 2014). Influenced by traditional emphasis on native-speaker norms in educational materials and teacher expectations, EFL learners frequently equate native-like pronunciation with overall language proficiency (Alghofaili & Elyas, 2017; Wach, 2011).

However, many researchers argue that while the aspiration for a native accent persists, insisting on such a target is both unrealistic and pedagogically counterproductive. For example, Irawan (2023) and Saito (2013) assert that the goal of pronunciation instruction should prioritise intelligibility over the near-impossible standard of native-like speech. Research indicates that intelligibility is derived from effective use of both segmental and suprasegmental features, which are more critical for successful communication than mere imitation of native speakers (Moedjito et al., 2019; Tergujeff, 2022). Additionally, Levis (2020) highlights a paradigm shift advocating for intelligibility as a more appropriate and achievable target for EFL learners, emphasising that the social and communicative functions of English are better served by clear and understandable speech than by exact native-like phonetic precision.

Moreover, the limitations of aiming for a native accent as an instructional goal are reinforced by research demonstrating that extensive pronunciation training can enhance comprehensibility, regardless of whether native-like articulation is achieved (Saito & Plonsky, 2019). These findings suggest that while many learners aspire to native-like speech, effective instruction should prioritise strategies that improve intelligibility and communicative efficiency (Derwing & Munro, 2005). This approach enables learners to gain a functional command of English that facilitates successful interactions across diverse linguistic communities, alleviating the pressure to attain a potentially (or more likely virtually) unattainable goal.

Online/Electronic Dictionaries

Online electronic dictionaries represent a new and innovative approach to EFL teaching and learning. They are associated with numerous benefits, including pronunciation learning.

- **Convenience and Accessibility:** Students prefer online dictionaries over traditional methods due to their ease of access and adaptability to individual learning paces. This self-reliance frequently results in heightened motivation, enabling learners to engage in practice outside the classroom context (Taladngoen et al., 2020; Krismonika et al., 2021).
- **Enhanced Pronunciation Accuracy:** Research indicates that students utilising electronic dictionaries for pronunciation training demonstrate better phoneme realisation and speaking precision (Sattar & Alghamdi, 2023). Clearly, these online resources offer EFL learners instant feedback, an essential element of the learning process.
- **Boosted Learner Autonomy:** Online dictionaries equip learners with resources for self-directed practice, promoting a feeling of ownership in their educational journey (Ningrum & Dewi, 2024; Sattar & Alghamdi, 2023).

However, it should also be noted that EFL learners face some challenges, such as underutilisation (Krismonika et al., 2021) and a lack of contextual learning (Yan et al., 2018). These challenges should be addressed adequately, preferably with the support of their teachers, to utilise modern digital technologies effectively.

METHOD

Research background

This research concentrated on the EFL pronunciation of Czech and Slovak university EFL learners. It aimed at examining their overall perception of pronunciation-related statements and identifying the difference in perception of pronunciation between the two groups of students – Czech EFL learners and Slovak EFL learners. Arising out of the objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the university EFL students' perceptions of English pronunciation?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences in the perception of English pronunciation between the Czech and Slovak respondents?

Sampling

The participants in this research included Czech and Slovak university EFL learners, majoring in Teacher Training of English Language and Literature at Slovak and Czech universities. A total of 103 students, 42 Czech and 61 Slovak, participated in the research. On average, the Czech students were 21.7 years of age, and the Slovak students were 22.6 years old. Their level of English varied from B2 to C1 on the CEFR scale. The confidentiality and voluntary aspect of participation were ensured. Additionally, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential.

and that they would not encounter any problems as a result of their participation in this study.

Research instrument and data analysis

A questionnaire utilising a 5-point Likert scale assessed respondents' perceptions of pronunciation. The research instrument underwent two revisions with assistance from the author's colleagues and peers. The final version included a total of 11 statements focusing on pronunciation-related issues. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to both student groups. Respondents were asked to select one of four options (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree) to express their level of agreement concerning the perception of pronunciation. Students were informed that there were no "right or wrong answers"; the correct answer was deemed to be the one that suited their opinion.

Data analysis

Eleven independent-sample t-tests were performed to compare the perceptions of EFL pronunciation between the Czech and Slovak EFL students. Auerbach and Zeitlin (2014) state that in social sciences, a standard threshold for the p-value is set at 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). This means that values at or below 0.05 are deemed statistically significant. The results section contains these essential items along with their statistical interpretations.

FINDINGS

Table 1 displays the Czech students' perceptions of EFL pronunciation. Overall, the highest level of agreement was assigned to the idea that exposure benefits their pronunciation. This is the only statement receiving a higher score than 4.2, indicating a strong level of agreement. The following six statements suggest a high level of agreement, revealing that they actively use online dictionaries for pronunciation practice. They believe that although younger learners tend to acquire EFL pronunciation more easily and quickly, even adult and older learners can attain a suitably relevant level of pronunciation. With high confidence in their own pronunciation, they also concur that their pronunciation has a significant impact on their overall speaking performance and that they wish to sound as much like a native speaker as possible. Lastly, they also agree that pronunciation warrants more time and attention in the field of EFL instruction. They remain uncertain whether pronunciation impacts their overall speaking ability more than grammar, and whether prosody has a more significant role than segmental features. They expressed disagreement only with one statement, disagreeing that pronunciation has a more powerful impact on their overall speaking performance than vocabulary.

Table 1
Czech students' perception of English pronunciation

CZECH STATEMENTS	
Statements	Mean
Exposure to English has a beneficial effect on my pronunciation.	4,62
I actively use online dictionaries to enhance my English pronunciation.	4,19
Even if one begins learning English as a foreign language in adulthood, one can still achieve a reasonably adequate level of pronunciation.	4,12
Having as native-like pronunciation as possible is something I want.	3,98
Teaching pronunciation deserves more time and attention from EFL teachers.	3,95
Younger learners of English have a tendency to acquire English pronunciation more quickly and with more ease.	3,81
My pronunciation significantly affects my overall speaking ability.	3,69
I have high confidence about my pronunciation.	3,36
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than grammar.	3,14
Prosody (stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.) occupies a more influential role within my English pronunciation than individual phonemes – vowels and consonants.	3,02
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than lexis.	2,60

Table 2 illustrates the Slovak perception of EFL pronunciation. Slovak students assigned a very high level of agreement to the first two statements, believing that exposure benefits their EFL pronunciation and expressing a desire to sound as close to a native speaker as possible. The statements that fall within the “agree” range are similar to those of the Czech learners, except for the statement, “*My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than grammar,*” which Slovaks also agreed with (the Czech students were undecided about this statement). Finally, the Slovak learners remain neutral regarding whether pronunciation impacts their overall speaking performance more than lexis and whether suprasegmentals play a more significant role in their pronunciation than individual sounds.

Table 2
Slovak students' perception of English pronunciation

SLOVAK STATEMENTS	
Statements	Mean
Exposure to English has a beneficial effect on my pronunciation.	4,79
Having as native-like pronunciation as possible is something I want.	4,38
Teaching pronunciation deserves more time and attention from EFL teachers.	4,33
Even if one begins learning English as a foreign language in adulthood, one can still achieve a reasonably adequate level of pronunciation.	4,20
I actively use online dictionaries to enhance my English pronunciation.	4,08
My pronunciation significantly affects my overall speaking ability.	3,92
Younger learners of English have a tendency to acquire English pronunciation more quickly and with more ease.	3,89
I have high confidence about my pronunciation.	3,79
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than grammar.	3,49
Prosody (stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.) occupies a more influential role within my English pronunciation than individual phonemes – vowels and consonants.	3,28
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than lexis.	2,77

The second research question investigated whether there are differences in perceptions of EFL pronunciation. To determine the statistical significance of differences across all questionnaire items, 11 independent-sample t-tests were conducted. Table 3 reveals that three statements have a p-value lower than 0,05, indicating their statistical significance.

Table 3
Comparison of Czech and Slovak students' perception of English pronunciation

Statements	Mean of Czech students	Mean of Slovak students	p-value
I have high confidence about my pronunciation.	3,36	3,79	0,01
My pronunciation significantly affects my overall speaking ability.	3,69	3,92	0,21
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than grammar.	3,14	3,49	0,08
My pronunciation has a more significant impact on my overall speaking ability than lexis.	2,60	2,77	0,31
Prosody (stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.) occupies a more influential role within my English pronunciation than individual phonemes – vowels and consonants.	3,02	3,28	0,13
Having as native-like pronunciation as possible is something I want.	3,98	4,38	0,02
Younger learners of English have a tendency to acquire English pronunciation more quickly and with more ease.	3,81	3,89	0,71
Even if one begins learning English as a foreign language in adulthood, one can still achieve a reasonably adequate level of pronunciation.	4,12	4,20	0,53
Teaching pronunciation deserves more time and attention from EFL teachers.	3,95	4,33	0,00
I actively use online dictionaries to enhance my English pronunciation.	4,19	4,08	0,56
Exposure to English has a beneficial effect on my pronunciation.	4,62	4,79	0,16

The level of agreement among Slovak students is significantly higher than that of Czech EFL students within the first statement, suggesting that they believe more strongly in their own pronunciation confidence. The second assertion indicating a statistically significant difference between the two groups pertains to the degree of similarity in pronunciation to that of a native speaker. Once more, the Slovak speakers expressed a markedly elevated degree of agreement. Finally, the statement “Teaching pronunciation deserves more time and attention from EFL teachers” received a significantly higher level of agreement from Slovak students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article sought to provide further insight into how Czech and Slovak EFL students perceive EFL pronunciation. It was discovered that the highest level of agreement was assigned to exposure. Apparently, being exposed to English is one of the crucial factors when it comes to English performance, as suggested by Gondová (2013).

While younger learners may acquire EFL pronunciation more quickly and easily, the research participants agree that older or adult learners can also reach a reasonable level of pronunciation, sufficient to be adequately comprehensible. Even if one begins

learning a language at an older age, they can develop the ability to communicate effectively, attaining an acceptable level of pronunciation.

Interesting results can be observed with the statement “Having as native-like pronunciation as possible is something I want”. While Czech EFL learners agree with this statement, the Slovak students' level of agreement is significantly higher, as the calculated *p*-value is lower than 0.05. This seems to align with studies showing that learners often view a native-like accent as a marker of fluency and social prestige (Almusharraf, 2021 or Tale, 2023). However, it should be emphasised that aiming at achieving a native-like accent does not appear to be a realistic and achievable goal, and that intelligibility is derived from effective use of both segmental and suprasegmental features, which can be regarded as more critical for successful communication than mere imitation of native speakers (Moedjito et al., 2019; Tergujeff, 2022). This is also in line with Lane (2010), who maintains that English students should work on building confidence in their spoken communication and aim to minimise pronunciation features that may obstruct understanding. Finally, it should be mentioned that one's accent is closely related to one's sense of identity (Jenkins, 2000).

While both Czech and Slovak students expressed a high level of agreement in their confidence about pronunciation, the mean value for the Slovak group is significantly higher than that of the Czech learners. Slovak students' confidence may stem from increased pronunciation practice; future studies should investigate their classroom experiences. Czech EFL instructors could employ a broader range of pronunciation activities (games, authentic materials, podcasts, English language learning apps, etc.) to enhance their students' confidence. Based on this research outcome, it can be concluded that the confidence of Slovak EFL university students is higher than that of Czech students, which can be regarded as an interesting piece of finding.

Another aspect that both groups of students agreed on is that teaching pronunciation is still neglected, which is also supported by numerous studies (e.g., Gilakjani et al., 2019; Kabir et al., 2022; Khasanah & Anggoro, 2022; Martin, 2020). However, it should be emphasised that not paying adequate attention to pronunciation instruction may have a detrimental impact on the overall performance of EFL learners. Allocating insufficient time to teaching and learning pronunciation is a recurring and long-standing problem which remains unresolved. It should also be noted that Slovak EFL students achieved significantly higher scores, indicating that they agree that pronunciation deserves more time in the context of EFL teaching. This may also be true because there is a number of textbooks that do not contain explicit pronunciation exercises and activities, which means that it is solely up to teachers how much and how often pronunciation will be explicitly addressed. Less experienced teachers may tend to prioritise grammar or vocabulary over pronunciation. Alternatively, if they use textbooks that do not contain any explicit pronunciation work, they simply follow this pattern rather than incorporating pronunciation exercises of their own in the form of handouts, worksheets, games, podcasts, short videos, etc.

Students also agreed that they actively use online dictionaries for pronunciation practice, as these online tools provide several benefits to EFL learners (Ningrum &

Dewi, 2024; Sattar & Alghamdi, 2023). With the click of a button, students can listen to the pronunciation of both standard accents or even hear complete sentences, which can undoubtedly be useful for learning and enhancing one's pronunciation, not only outside the classroom but also during English lessons.

The Czech respondents remain unsure whether pronunciation has a greater impact on overall spoken production when compared to grammar, but not to vocabulary. With Slovak students, the participants agree that pronunciation influences overall speaking ability more than grammar (being neutral about vocabulary), which can be considered an interesting finding, emphasising the importance of EFL pronunciation of Slovak learners. It should also be noted that the statistically significant differences regarding these statements between the two groups were not recognised. However, as previously mentioned, there is a tendency to overlook pronunciation, partly because grammar and, predominantly, vocabulary often take precedence.

Finally, participants remain undecided about whether suprasegmental categories are assigned a higher importance when compared to segmentals. This is in line with Espinoza et al. (2021), who claim that EFL students benefit most from pronunciation teaching that involves both segmental features (individual sounds like vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (including intonation, rhythm, and stress). Apparently, both segmentals and prosody must be taught as they seem to complement each other. However, it should be noted that limited pronunciation instruction in the two countries might have influenced this finding.

Like all research, this study also has some limitations, such as a smaller sample size or the absence of pronunciation tests and/or open-ended questions. While surveys indicate trends, future studies might benefit from incorporating pronunciation tests for more robust evidence.

In conclusion, pronunciation holds significant importance, as indicated by the respondents' answers, and merits substantial attention from EFL instructors, given that it constitutes an inseparable and vital part of speaking skills. Teachers ought to vary pronunciation-related activities, such as games or videos, encompassing both work on individual vowels and consonants, as well as prosody elements (stress, connected speech, intonation). Moreover, targeted exercises focusing on suprasegmentals or confidence-building techniques can also be considered appropriate. Nonetheless, it is evident that pronunciation remains an overlooked area while other language components, such as vocabulary and grammar, often take precedence. Further research in this area is essential to illuminate this important issue.

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