

# 'Polglish' in Polish Eyes: What English Studies Majors Think About Their Pronunciation in English

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**Abstract** This paper reports on selected results of a large-scale questionnaire study conducted among Polish students of English. Continuing the tradition of pronunciation attitude surveys in Poland, the present study concentrates on a possible relationship between what students perceive as correct pronunciation and a Polish accent in English in correspondence to the level of studies (BA vs. MA) and gender. Supporting the results reported in earlier studies, the study shows that a vast majority of respondents want their pronunciation to be correct and would want to speak like native speakers, even if it required a lot of their time and effort; moreover, even though students may have doubts about success, they would prefer their pronunciation not to be Polish-accented. The decomposition of the data shows an effect of education level and gender on the results, with females less likely to claim that their pronunciation does not have Polish accent features, and MA students less concerned with Polish features in their English pronunciation than the BA students. This may suggest that a strongly negative attitude towards 'Polglish' depends on the education level and experience on the one hand, and a gender-specific approach to self-assessed accent features on the other.

## 1 Introduction

Research into the attitudes and beliefs of the students towards their pronunciation in English has a relatively short, but interesting history in Poland. With the main aim of probing the validity of a native-speaker model and the usefulness of pronunciation

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instruction in an academic setting, the studies asked two major types of questions, which can be simplified as (i) would you like to speak like a native speaker and (ii) do you think pronunciation (instruction) is important? Although individual studies differed in the approach and/or focus and the answers largely depended on the way the questions were asked (see Sobkowiak, 2002, p. 178), the majority of students provided a positive answer to both questions, especially if they were enrolled in English-major programs (Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005). Thus, Polish students may seem to be fairly traditional in their attitude to the pronunciation of English, upholding the status of native English as desirable in education, both as a model in teaching and as a target in pronunciation learning. When viewed from the perspective of comfortable intelligibility (Kenworthy, 1987) or English as a Lingua Franca approach (Jenkins, 2000), the above conclusion from earlier studies seems surprising enough to provoke further questions and call for more research. The way a present study hopes to contribute to solving the puzzle of Polish students' attitudes to English pronunciation is to adopt a Polish-accent perspective; thus, the study explores the beliefs of the students about their own pronunciation and a Polish accent in English. Unlike other studies, what is attempted here is the analysis of the impact of two factors: gender and educational experience, operationalised in terms of BA vs. MA level of studies.

Previous studies on the attitudes of Polish students of English adopted a more general perspective. The first study, referred to as an element of inspiration by Sobkowiak (2002), was conducted by Krzyżyński (1988), who was interested in students' views on pronunciation as compared to other elements of the English system and found that English majors in Poznań believed pronunciation to be less important than grammar or lexis for overall language proficiency; moreover, in line with the researcher's views, they believed that correct pronunciation was given too much attention in Polish schools. These findings were partly corroborated by Sobkowiak (2002) in his large-scale study of students enrolled in different English major programs in the same institution (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań), with the majority of students (67 %) not agreeing with the statement that "good pronunciation is more important than grammar or vocabulary in English" (Sobkowiak, 2002, p. 183), but many of them (48 %) practicing pronunciation regularly themselves and many more (75 %) wishing they had more pronunciation practice in the institutional setting. The study conducted by Waniek-Klimczak (1997) in the Łódź area brought similar results with respect to a positive attitude of English majors towards pronunciation instruction; it was also in this study that the question of the aims of pronunciation learning was explicitly asked, with native-like pronunciation contrasted with fluency, confidence and ease of communication. Not surprisingly perhaps, when asked if they would like to speak with native-like accents, students said yes; however, when asked to point to major aims in pronunciation teaching, they chose fluency, confidence and communication much more often than native-like accents. In another study, Waniek-Klimczak and Klimczak (2005) compared the attitudes of English and non-English majors at the University of Łódź and found that, although both groups said they would like to speak with a native-like accent, it was the groups of English majors who also said they believed

it was possible to achieve. A strong preference for native-like pronunciation was found in yet another study conducted in Poznań: Janicka et al. (2005) found that English majors had a strong positive attitude towards native models in pronunciation teaching, with British or American English accepted as the two major choices.

Focusing on native-speaker models to a considerable extent, the above-mentioned studies seem to have neglected students' attitudes towards a rather obvious alternative available to the students, i.e. the pronunciation of English with a Polish accent. It is this specific perspective that is adopted in the present paper, which reports on a 'Polglish' aspect of learner accent opinions and beliefs on the basis of a large-scale questionnaire study exploring attitudes towards English pronunciation among Polish students enrolled in English tertiary level programs (BA and MA) in Poland. The inspiration for the line of reasoning proposed here comes from two major sources: the very term 'Polglish', somewhat controversially used for Polish-accented English by Sobkowiak (1996), and earlier studies in a European context, which show that L1-accented English is not accepted as a potential target for pronunciation learning, as it enjoys very low prestige among learners (e.g., Austrian students of English downgrading Austrian-accented English in Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997 or Croatian advanced students' negative attitude towards a Croatian-accented English in Smojver and Stanojević, 2013). As mentioned above, earlier studies conducted in Poland in similar settings showed that advanced students value pronunciation instruction (Waniek-Klimczak, 1997), would like to have more pronunciation practice in their language training (Sobkowiak, 2002) and have a strong preference for native-like pronunciation as their main goal (Janicka et al., 2005). While these findings seem to indicate that, at least among English majors, no other goal than native-like pronunciation is accepted, it is tempting to see to what extent the Polish accent may be perceived as an identity-signalling alternative, as suggested by the term 'Polglish' (as compared to e.g., 'Spanglish').

## 2 The Study

The data analysed in this study come from a large-scale project conducted by at the University of Łódź and the University of Silesia with the aim of exploring the relationship between the attitudes towards the pronunciation varieties in the native language (L1) and the target language (L2) among students enrolled in the English programmes in respective regions (see Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013 for a full report on participant data). The key research questions explored here refer to the attitude towards Polish-accented English in the context of two major grouping variables: the level of education coupled with experience (BA vs. MA level) and gender. The following specific questions are analysed:

1. Do advanced learners of English (English majors) care about the correctness of their pronunciation in English?

2. Do they believe their pronunciation in English does NOT contain features characteristic for a Polish accent?
3. Would they want their pronunciation NOT to have Polish features?
4. Would they want their pronunciation to show that they come from Poland?

The interpretation of the answers to the above questions is based on the assumption that correctness can be associated with native-like or proficient non-native speech (Q 1), and the attitude towards Polish-accented English may be related to self-assessed pronunciation (Q 2) as well as pronunciation goals (Q 3) in a broader socio-cultural context (Q 4). Additional aspects taken into consideration in the discussion include items related to a possible wish to speak English like a native speaker of this language and the reasons for such a choice (see Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013 for a thorough analysis of the answers to these questions).

## **2.1 Methods**

The data were gathered by means of an anonymous questionnaire in Polish; the questionnaire comprised background (bio) questions and 27 sets of main survey questions and statements. Most items followed the Likert-scale format, asking the participant's agreement or disagreement with given statements on a 5-point scale (from 5—strongly agree to 1—strongly disagree) with several questions requiring a nominal 'yes/no' answer. All participants volunteered to take part in the research and were not paid for their participation. It took them about 20 min on average to complete the questionnaire. The results were analysed with respect to the number of students choosing a specific answer in relation to the level of the study (BA vs. MA) and gender of participants. All responses were transformed to numerical values for statistical analyses (descriptive statistics and ANOVA).

### **2.1.1 Participants**

The participants were 507 students of English (translation and teacher training programmes) at Polish state universities (BA and MA), teacher training colleges, state schools of professional education (BA level) and one private college (BA level). The majority of respondents were females (four times as many as males) studying at the BA level (see Table 1). Table 1 presents the number of subjects grouped according to the independent (grouping) variables of gender and tertiary education level selected for the present study. The difference in the sample size between gender and level results from the fact that six participants failed to provide their gender in the questionnaire.

**Table 1** Sample characteristics for independent variables of Gender and Level

Factor	Feature	Sample
Gender <sup>a</sup>	Female	403
N = 501	Male	98
Level	BA	393
N = 507	MA	114

<sup>a</sup> 5 subjects failed to provide this specification

## 2.1.2 Participant Language Proficiency Profile

As participants were enrolled in English programmes at the BA or MA level, the level of their language proficiency in English can be predicted to differ, with MA students expected to have reached at least a C1 proficiency level at the end of their BA programmes. The proficiency level of the BA students is more difficult to predict, as they would have been accepted on the basis of their final secondary school language exam, with the requirements as to the grade dependent on the popularity of a given tertiary institution (with a general tendency for state universities to attract more students and consequently, requiring higher grades). The expected difference in the grades may have had a direct impact on students' self-rated proficiency level, especially among the BA students. As discussed in an earlier report on selected aspects of the study (Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013), the results show a clear relationship between the level of education (BA vs. MA) and the type of tertiary institution (State University, College vs. Private University), with the mean score for self-rated proficiency in English (*I regard my command of English as excellent (C2), advanced (C1), upper-intermediate (B2), intermediate (B1), elementary (A1/A2)*) at the level of 4.03 ( $SD = 0.67$ ) and a significant main effect of the place of study [ $F(2, 344) = 10.887, p < 0.001$ ]. The highest mean ratings were provided by state university students ( $M = 3.95, SD = 0.63$ ) followed by college students ( $M = 3.81, SD = 0.56$ ) and private university students ( $M = 3.25, SD = 0.58$ ). The difference between BA and MA students was highly significant [ $F(1, 401) = 113.84, p < 0.001$ ], with MA students rating their proficiency considerably higher ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.51$ ) than BA students ( $M = 3.89, SD = 0.6$ ).

Self-rated pronunciation level (*I regard my pronunciation in English as excellent, very good, good, poor, elementary*) tended to be assessed lower than language proficiency, with the average score 3.26,  $SD = 0.70$ . The main effect of the place of study for the state university ( $M = 3.11, SD = 0.77$ ), the college ( $M = 3.2, SD = 0.59$ ), and the private university ( $M = 3, SD = 0.73$ ) was not significant [ $F(2, 344) = 1.134, p = 0.32$ ], indicating that unlike in the case of overall proficiency level, the place of study did not systematically affect self-rating of English pronunciation. Interestingly, however, there was a very strong effect of experience on self-rating pronunciation scores [ $F(1, 400) = 37.38, p < 0.001$ ]. MA students rated their pronunciation substantially higher ( $M = 3.64, SD = 0.62$ ) than BA students ( $M = 3.18, SD = 0.69$ ).

### 2.1.3 Questionnaire Items Analysed in the Study

In the current study, the following items from the questionnaire have been analysed:

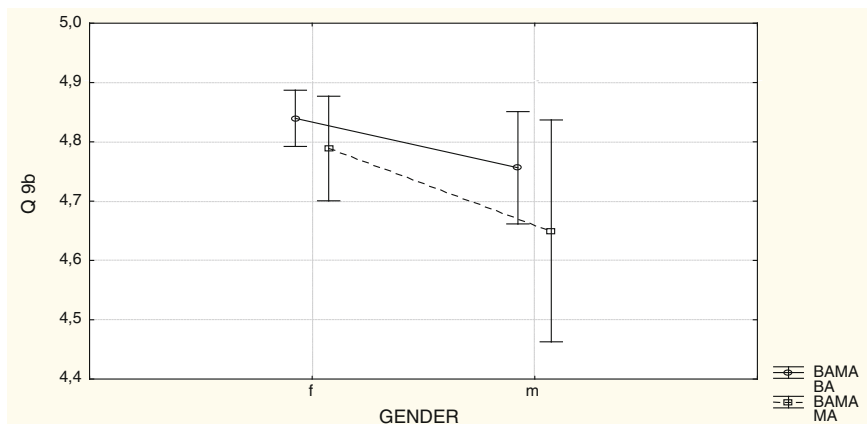
- (9b). I care about my pronunciation in English being fully correct.
- (11b). I think that my pronunciation in English DOES NOT contain features characteristic for Polish pronunciation.
- (12.b). I care about my English pronunciation NOT having features characteristic for Polish pronunciation.
- (7b). I care about my pronunciation in English signalling that I am from Poland.

All of the above items were a subject to a Likert scale, with the highest score (5) coinciding with the answer ‘strongly agree’ and the minima (1) with the answer ‘strongly disagree’. The numerical data for each question were analysed by means of a two-way independent  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA with two levels for each independent variable (Gender: female /male; Level: BA /MA). Thus, the results are based on the analysis of the effect of either Gender or Level as an independent variable on 1–5 responses as dependent variables. The correspondence between the questions was checked with Spearman Rank correlation.

## 2.2 Results and Analysis

The first question to be considered explores the issue of correctness of pronunciation without specifying the conditions for correctness. The reason for asking a question formulated in such general terms was the hope that the relationship between the answer to this question and the questions related to native-like vs. Polish accented features would make it possible to deduce the meaning of correctness for the respondents. The mean score across the sample proves that respondents find correctness of pronunciation an important issue, with the mean score close to the maximal one ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ). The analysis for the effect of the two grouping variables (Level and Gender) shows that although neither of these factors systematically affects the scores, it is Gender that is much closer to a systematic differentiation of the data than Level, with the results close to significant in the latter case [ $F(1,498) = 3.814$ ,  $p = 0.051$ ], but not the former [ $F(1,503) = 1.3$ ,  $p = 0.25$ ]. Thus, the correctness of pronunciation proves to be important for the respondents across the Level of studies, with MA students scoring slightly lower ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) than BA students ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) and with females tending to value the correctness more ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) than males ( $M = 4.73$ ;  $SD = 0.44$ ) (see Fig. 1). This final finding is by no means surprising, as it supports a generally expected tendency for females to place emphasis on correctness in their first language (Labov, 1972). There was no significant interaction between Gender and Level [ $F(1, 496) = 0.221$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ].

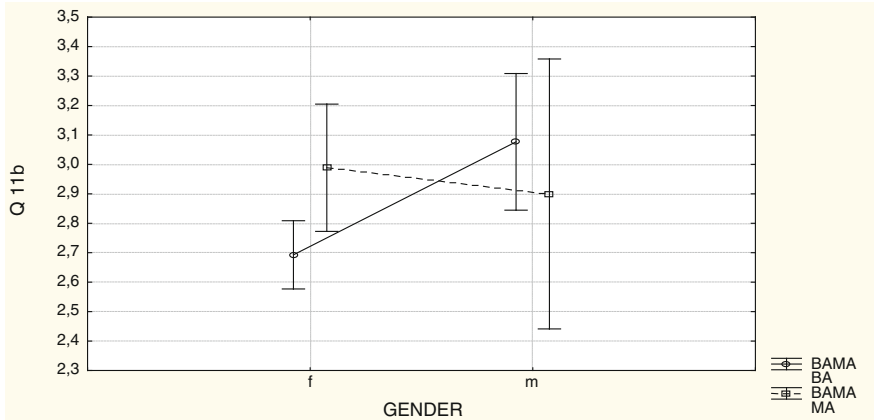
The two following questions were posed to uncover the beliefs of the students with respect to Polish features in their English pronunciation: the first question: (11b). *I think that my pronunciation in English DOES NOT contain features*



**Fig. 1** The interaction between gender and level for the question (9b) *I care about my pronunciation in English being fully correct*

*characteristic for Polish pronunciation* explores self-awareness and self-rating with respect to Polish accent features, while the other one: (12b). *I care about my English pronunciation NOT having features characteristic for Polish pronunciation* aims to add an attitudinal value to the previous question. When viewed across the data, the results prove to follow a pattern that is captured by Spearman Rank correlation as highly significant [ $r(504) = 0.17, p < 0.001$ ], indicating a predictable correlation that students who do not desire to have Polish features in their English pronunciation will put more care to avoid them. However, when analysed for the effect of Gender and Level, the results suggest that the two sides of the coin, i.e. self-rating and the attitude towards Polish features are very different and motivated by diverse factors. More specifically, with the mean score at the level of  $M = 2.8$  ( $SD = 1.05$ ) in the self-rating question (11b), the results prove to be sensitive to the effect of Gender across the group [ $F(1,499) = 5.693, p < 0.05$ ], with females rating their pronunciation as more Polish-accented ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.04$ ) than males ( $M = 3.04, SD = 1.09$ ) (see Fig. 2). Surprisingly, although BA students self-rated their English pronunciation as characterized by more Polish pronunciation features ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.04$ ) than MA students ( $M = 2.95, SD = 1.09$ ) the difference was not statistically significant [ $F(1, 504) = 2.42, p > 0.05$ ]. No significant interaction was found between Gender x Level and self-reported degree of Polish features in English pronunciation [ $F(1, 504) = 2.42, p > 0.05$ ].

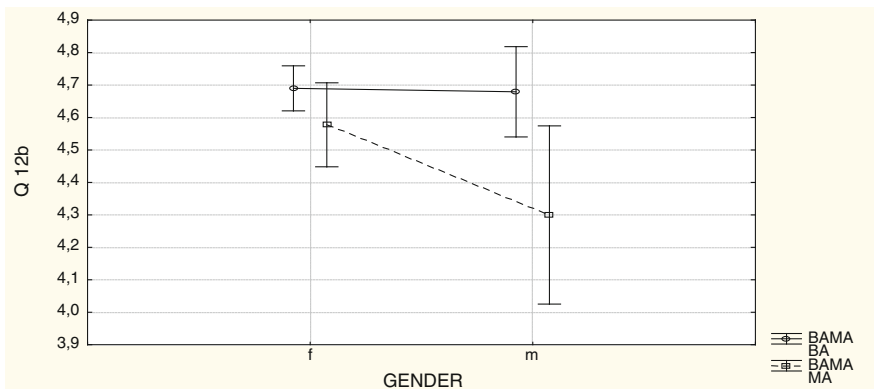
When it comes to the attitudinal question (12b), the overall score is very high ( $M = 4.7, SD = 0.63$ ); here it is the effect of Level [ $F(1, 504) = 4.762, p < 0.05$ ], and not Gender [ $F(1, 499) = 0.791, p > 0.05$ ], that proves to differentiate the groups in a systematic way. While both females ( $M = 4.67, SD = 0.62$ ) and males ( $M = 4.6, SD = 0.65$ ) provided very similar rating, BA students were significantly more concerned about not having Polish-accented features in their pronunciation ( $M = 4.69, SD = 0.6$ ) than MA students ( $M = 4.54, SD = 0.71$ ). There was no



**Fig. 2** The interaction between gender and level for the question (11b) *I think that my pronunciation in English DOES NOT contain features characteristic for Polish pronunciation*

significant interaction between Level and Gender [ $F(1, 504) = 4.762, p > 0.05$ ] despite observably lower scores for males in the group of MA students (see Fig. 3).

The final question analysed in connection with Polish is the potential identity function of the accent explored in the answers to the question (7b): *I care about my pronunciation in English signalling that I am from Poland*. Interestingly, however, with the mean value at the level of  $M = 1.4$  ( $SD = 0.61$ ), the results do not prove to be systematically sensitive to any of the independent variables, indicating a regular distribution across Gender [ $F(1, 499) = 0.791, p > 0.05$ ] (females:  $M = 1.4, SD = 0.69$ ; males:  $M = 1.38, SD = 0.65$ ) and Level [ $F(1, 504) = 4.762, p > 0.05$ ] (BA:  $M = 1.39, SD = 0.68, MA: M = 1.41, SD = 0.68$ ).



**Fig. 3** The interaction between gender and level for the question (12b) *I care about my English pronunciation NOT having features characteristic for Polish pronunciation*



### 3 Discussion

The attitudes and beliefs of Polish advanced learners of English, especially the ones studying to become language specialists, have been repeatedly found to reflect a strong position of a native-speaker model, with respondents claiming that they aspire towards native-like pronunciation (e.g., Waniek-Klimczak, 1997; Janicka et al., 2005; Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005). The language profile of participants in this study shows that they follow a similar pattern to the one found in earlier studies, i.e. they would like to speak like native speakers even if it required a lot of time and effort (see Sect. 2.2.). Moreover, while they believe pronunciation in English to be important, they also do not feel satisfied with their own results, self-rating it much lower than their general language proficiency in English (global mean 3.26 for self-rated proficiency vs. 4.03 for the command of English, see Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013). These findings suggest that the respondents either treat pronunciation as a difficult element of language proficiency or they find native-like pronunciation particularly difficult to attain. As it seems logical to expect learners to be frustrated with their own progress if they set the goal too high, probing further into students' beliefs, we turn to the issue of correctness and the attitudes towards the 'Polishness' of their accent. The results for the whole investigated population show that correctness is an extremely important aspect of pronunciation (Q 1, global mean 4.8); given previous findings (Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013), we have all reasons to expect correctness to be defined in terms of native-speaker norm. Attempts to investigate the issue further by exploring the attitude toward Polish accent features do not provide evidence for admitting Polish accent features into the possible correctness scale, with a vast majority of the students not wanting their pronunciation in English to have Polish features (Q 3, global mean 4.7). The answers to the question about the beliefs about Polish pronunciation features being present in respondents' English further support the assumption that 'good' pronunciation is measured with respect to native-speaker speech, as the global mean is relatively low, at the level of 2.8 (Q 2). When compared to the self-rated proficiency level (3.26), the result for the NOT having Polish accent features seems strikingly low. The difference between the results in these two items may suggest, however, that it is actually the very presence of Polish accent features that students associate with 'incorrect' pronunciation in English. In view of the above, it is not surprising that a vast majority express negative attitude towards an ethnic identity function of their accents, saying that they would NOT want their accent to show that they come from Poland (Q 4, global mean 1.4).

While the above results for the whole group of respondents show a general trend, the investigation of the effect of two factors: level of study and gender, reveals the existence of an interesting dynamism in the data. The latter factor seems to be relatively rarely included in the study of non-native accent beliefs; in the current study, it proves to be significant in the case of the beliefs connected with the presence of Polish accent features in English pronunciation (Q 2), with females more critically evaluating their pronunciation in this respect (we assume here that

Polish features are perceived as undesirable by the respondents). This result suggests that women may be more critical of their pronunciation as they aspire towards native-like model that they perceive as correct pronunciation (the standard), following the pattern found in sociolinguistic studies (Labov, 1972). Interestingly, while other items do not yield statistically significant difference between investigated males and females, the results differ in the way that may encourage further research into the effect of gender. More specifically, the data show that firstly, females declare caring about the correctness of their pronunciation more than males (with the difference approximating the probability level  $p = 0.0513$ , Q 1); secondly, although the two groups do not differ systematically with respect to the care about the lack of Polish features in their English pronunciation, females seem much more decisive in their attitudes (a smaller range of values, from 4.6 to 7.73 as compared to 4.48–4.73 for males, Q 3); finally, the two groups do not differ in a strongly negative attitude to their pronunciation showing their ethnic origin (Q 4), although the difference in the distribution of values can be also observed (1.34–1.46 for females, 1.23–1.51 for males).

Braking down the data for the level of studies (BA vs. MA) brings other interesting results: here the difference between the groups is significant in the case of Q 3 (*I care about my pronunciation not having Polish features*). Interestingly, the more experienced MA students declare a relatively lower degree of belief that Polish pronunciation features matter and need to be eradicated. The mean values are still high, with the range of answers between 4.63–4.75 for BA and 4.42–4.66 for MA students; however, the systematicity of the difference suggests that it is a regular change that we are dealing with. If this reasoning is correct, then both language and general life experience (MA students tend to be older than BA students) may affect the attitude of English majors, who become more realistic (with pronunciation still believed to be important but also difficult) and perhaps also less strongly attached to the native-speaker model. Their answers (still very high, but closer to ‘agree’ than strongly agree’) can also be interpreted in terms of a wider perspective on their professional development. As shown by an earlier study (Waniek-Klimczak et al., 2013), although both MA and BA students declare that they would want to attain native-speaker pronunciation, even if it costs a lot of time and effort, there is a difference in the reasons, with the MA students rating ‘importance for one’s job’ significantly higher than BAs. Thus, naturally, the MA students do become more job-oriented, with correct, even native-like accent potentially useful, but not crucial. Further studies are needed to show whether and at which stage experience increases acceptance for Polish accent features and whether ‘Polglish’ stands the chance of being recognized as an ethnically-embedded signal of identity. With the group of students explored in the present study, English specialists, the tendency to value ultimate attainment is not only not surprising, but in fact expected (see e.g., Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997; Waniek-Klimczak & Klimczak, 2005). It will require a comparison across different students and users of English in Poland to see to what extent ‘Polglish’ is recognized as a variety and whether a positive value can be attached to it.

## 4 Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the attitudes of Polish English major students with respect to the elements of Polish features in their pronunciation. The results show that the majority of students care about correctness of their pronunciation and do not want Polish features to be present in their speech; given their virtually unanimous agreement that native speaker accent is to be desired (94 % say 'yes' to the statement: *If it was possible, I would like to speak like a native English or American person, even if it required a lot of time and effort*), it is the native-speaker norm that seems to be associated with correctness. Thus, the present study supports earlier findings in proving that 'native speaker is not dead', at least not in the pronunciation of English. However, interesting results have been obtained with respect to the effect of gender and the level of studies, with the former significant in the case of self-rated amount of Polish features in English pronunciation (females not agreeing that their pronunciation does not contain Polish features more strongly than males) and the latter in the case of the care taken for their pronunciation not having these features—the BA students care much more about it than MA students, who are more ready to accept 'Polglish' in their English. This suggests that students' pronunciation goals change with experience; however, it is unclear whether the change signals an increased readiness to embrace 'Polglish' as a sign of identity or, simply, an inevitable reality. The difference between the two types of motivation has important implications for pronunciation teaching and learning, as it is in the former case, but not the latter, that increased instruction may not be needed at the MA level. If what experienced students say stems from their lack of success in pronunciation learning rather than a conscious accent choice, pronunciation teaching goals may need to be revised, but pronunciation instruction needs to be continued.

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