

PRONUNCIATION IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A STUDY OF MACEDONIAN TEACHERS' TRAINING, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES

Aleksandra Lazoroska, The University of Arizona
Agata Guskaroska, Iowa State University

This study examined Macedonian EFL teachers' training, attitudes and practices related to pronunciation as well as the extent to which pronunciation is taught across the Macedonian educational system. Data were collected through an online Qualtrics survey from 23 EFL teachers in the Macedonian teaching context. The results from the study revealed that the teachers lack pronunciation training; nevertheless, they reported they would be willing to receive additional training. Results also showed that teachers focus on intelligibility, while they believe native-like speech is important for being perceived as a good professional. Finally, their practices show use of repetition, drills, and minimal pairs, mostly by modeling native speaker's speech. The pedagogical implications arising from this study indicate that there is a need for reconsidering the place of pronunciation in English classes and the ways whereby the teachers could teach pronunciation.

INTRODUCTION

Even though pronunciation instruction can provide a number of benefits for the learners and pronunciation is considered a fundamental element in the acquisition of oral skills in a second language (MacDonald, 2002), it still does not receive the attention it deserves in English learning classes. A number of studies have investigated pronunciation instruction in various contexts, such as English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (Henderson et al., 2012; Kirkova-Naskova, 2009), English as a second language (ESL) contexts (Foote et al., 2011; MacDonald, 2002), and in languages other than English (FL) contexts (Huensch, 2019a; Nagle et al., 2018), but limited research has investigated under-represented EFL contexts, such as in Macedonia. Given the importance of understanding the current situation in the language classroom, this study aims to expand the literature by exploring EFL teachers' experiences in the Macedonian context ($n = 23$) to better understand their prior training, beliefs, and practices regarding pronunciation teaching/learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is well-known that a number of studies explored teachers' beliefs and practices in ESL, EFL and FL contexts. For example, some of the ESL studies took place in the USA (Baker, 2011), Canada (Foote et al., 2011), Australia (MacDonald, 2002), etc. Teaching a language in a country where the language is official or used in everyday life (ESL context), may be different from teaching in a country where the language is not official (EFL context) and hence learners do not have the same level of exposure to the language, immersion in the culture, and, perhaps, motivation. Similarly, the instructors in FL contexts might face these same challenges, such as limited exposure to the target language, lack of motivation, resources, etc. Nonetheless, it is important to note that over the past decade, English has solidified its place as the most commonly studied foreign language worldwide, and it is often perceived as an important means of communication. For example, in

small EFL contexts such as Macedonia, the number of learners taking EFL courses in primary school has risen from 70% in 2000 (Dimova, 2003) to 99-100% in 2016 (Eurostat, 2018). Similarly, in Macedonia, English was introduced as a mandatory foreign language in first grade approximately 10 years ago. These numbers as well as the changes in the curricula implemented by the Ministry of Education in Macedonia demonstrate that the ability to communicate in English has become increasingly valued in national, European, and global contexts.

While diverse learning contexts may have a number of differences, many studies exploring teachers' training, attitudes, and practices related to pronunciation show some similar findings. A lack of training for pronunciation instruction for language teachers has been found by many researchers in various contexts (Henderson et al., 2012; Huensch, 2019b). As Huensch (2019b) argued, most studies suggest that the only reported "training" in pronunciation teaching is a course the teachers took in Phonetics and Phonology (Buss, 2016; Foote et al. 2011; Kirkova-Naskova et al., 2013). Henderson et al. (2012) in their EPTiES survey, explored and compared English pronunciation teaching practices in seven European countries. Their results also indicated that EFL teachers reported little to no training in how to teach pronunciation (Henderson et al., 2012). Another finding that was similar regarding teachers' beliefs and attitudes was that most teachers consider pronunciation to be an important part of English language courses (Breitkreutz et al., 2001; Henderson et al., 2012) but interestingly enough, they do not practice teaching pronunciation in their classroom usually due to lack of training, time or confidence (Georgiou, 2019; Guskaroska, 2019). Georgiou (2019) explored teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices in Greek-Cypriot public schools and found that the older group of EFL teachers believed that "pronunciation is learnt only if someone lives in the country where the foreign language is dominant" (p. 545). These findings show a few common issues related to pronunciation teaching that usually arise in all teaching contexts.

While these studies have revealed valuable information about instructional practices in ESL, EFL, and FL contexts, more research is needed to keep this information up to date, confirm these findings, and/or explore whether any changes have occurred throughout the years. To our knowledge, only a few studies have explored the Macedonian context, such as Kirkova-Naskova et al. (2013) and Henderson et al. (2012). Both studies discussed the Macedonian situation along with other European countries and provided broad discussions on the European context, whereas small EFL contexts, such as Macedonia, still need a closer look and exploration. Therefore, we felt the need to further explore the current situation by specifically looking at the teachers' perspectives on teaching pronunciation. This study examines the teachers' perspectives on and experiences with pronunciation in the Macedonian educational system. The purpose of this study is to investigate the training teachers receive, the extent to which pronunciation is taught in Macedonia, as well as to examine the English teachers' beliefs and approaches in this area.

Research Questions

The three guiding research questions of the study are the following:

RQ1. What training do Macedonian EFL instructors have in teaching pronunciation?

RQ2. What are Macedonian EFL instructors' beliefs and attitudes towards teaching pronunciation?

RQ3. What are Macedonian EFL instructors' practices in pronunciation instruction in their classrooms?

METHODS

Participants

The total number of recruited participants in the study was 25. However, 2 of the participants did not complete the survey. Therefore, the total number of participants whose responses were obtained, recorded, and analyzed was 23. The participants were all teachers working in different educational contexts in Macedonia. Of the 23 respondents, 12 of them worked in primary school ($n = 12$), 7 worked in secondary school ($n = 7$), and 4 were professors working in higher education institutions ($n = 4$).

The participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researchers, and the link to the survey was shared with them via email and social media. This enabled the researchers to connect with instructors with whom they had not had any personal or professional contact before. The participants did not receive any compensation for participation in this study. However, as many of them expressed interest in the findings, the researchers agreed to share the final results as well as the discussion of the findings once the study has been published. Despite the fact that the instructors who participated in the study came from all levels of education (primary, secondary, and higher education), we are aware that this may not be a representative sample of teachers in this context, as the number of the study participants presents only a fraction of the total EFL teacher population in Macedonia.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a Qualtrics survey which was distributed online to teachers working in different educational contexts in Macedonia. The data were collected within a period of two weeks. The survey was a condensed and adapted version of the survey questions used in Huensch (2019a) and Henderson et al. (2012). During the process of the survey design, the researchers discussed factors that might discourage the potential participants from participating in the study. Length of the survey, clarity of questions, and organization of the survey were the three factors which the researchers took into consideration when finalizing the study. The survey had 27 questions divided into three sections. The first section focused on the teachers' language and education background, that is, years of experience, teaching context, residency in a native English-speaking country, and level of proficiency in languages other than English, as well as the student population they have worked with. The second section focused specifically on pronunciation-related attitudes. Hence, these questions were aimed at eliciting responses related to pronunciation training the participants had received during their formal or informal education, the role of pronunciation in their language instruction, and areas of focus when teaching pronunciation or addressing pronunciation-related errors or issues in the classroom. The last section focused on the teachers' practices and views regarding accentedness and intelligibility.

The majority of the questions in the three sections were multiple choice questions, with some of them having the option of providing a response or elaboration on the given answer. The last section's questions were open-ended, given the fact that the topics they were touching on could not be categorized in multiple choice options. This created a space for the teachers to freely express their personal views, without having their attitudes and beliefs affected by the provided answers. The themes of the open-ended questions were coded according to a coding scheme previously

developed by the researchers. In the recruitment process, other than the explanation that the survey contains questions about pronunciation practices in the EFL classroom, the participants were not given details about the study.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze and present the results. The responses to the multiple-choice questions were converted into percentages for more convenient visual presentation. To the set of questions related to the training and instructional practices, participants were responding on a scale from 1- 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest; or 1 being “not important at all” and 5 being “extremely important”). The responses to the open-ended questions related to the instructional practices of teachers were coded by the researchers by looking for common patterns among the responses. These categories are presented in Figure 6.

RESULTS

Instructors' Pronunciation Training

To answer RQ1 regarding the training that Macedonian EFL instructors have in teaching pronunciation, we included data about the training that teachers received as EFL learners, as well as the training they received to become future EFL teachers (Figure 1). The results showed that teachers report that they are more satisfied with the training they received as future teachers with 24% selecting 5 on the scale of satisfaction; 33% selecting 4, and 28% choosing 3. Interestingly enough, their claim of having satisfactory pronunciation training is based on the only instance when they encountered pronunciation – through Phonetics and Phonology courses (Figure 2). While 38.1% argue that they have not received any pronunciation training, only 4.76% selected “other” but did not specify the type of training they referred to. Nonetheless, 57.14% of the participants described their training as Phonetics and Phonology courses. These courses in the majority of higher education institutions offering degrees in language teaching, however, mainly focus on IPA and written transcription and do not provide specific instruction on teaching pronunciation. Moreover, 95% of the EFL teachers reported a desire for training and resources, with 49% of them not having a preference whether the course would be face to face or online, 24% expressing a preference for an online course, and 19% showing preference for a face-to-face course (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Satisfaction with training as EFL learner and teacher

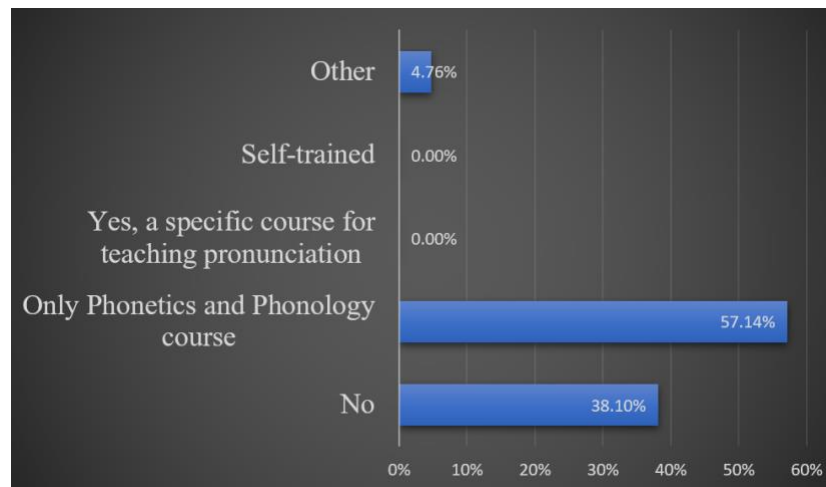


Figure 2. Teaching pronunciation training

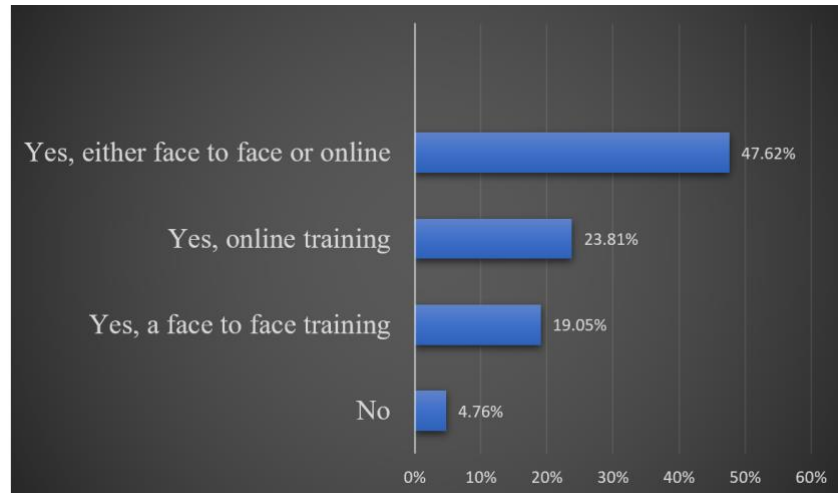


Figure 3. Willingness to receive additional training

Instructors' Practices in Pronunciation Instruction

To answer RQ2 regarding Macedonian EFL instructors' practices in pronunciation instruction, we asked the participants how often they include pronunciation teaching in their classrooms, which aspects of pronunciation they address, and what types of exercises they have used. Even though a large percentage (64%) of the participants stated that they often incorporate pronunciation in their classes (Figure 4), 31% claimed they rarely incorporate pronunciation in their teaching, and only 5% stated they almost never addressed it. Furthermore, it seems that 65% of the teachers addressed both segmentals and suprasegmentals, with 26% of the respondents claiming that they focus on segmentals and 11% stating they cover suprasegmentals (Figure 5). Another interesting finding was that, according to the coded responses, they do not use a wide variety of pronunciation-related exercises. The most common type of exercise (47.1%) was described as "listen and repeat," followed by "modeling" at 23.52%, "articulatory" at 17.65%, and "listening discrimination" at 11.77% (Figure 6).

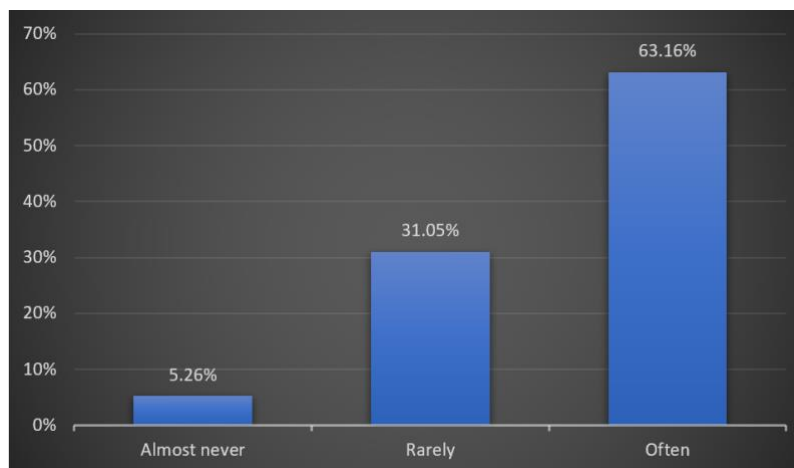


Figure 4. Frequency of teaching pronunciation in EFL classes.

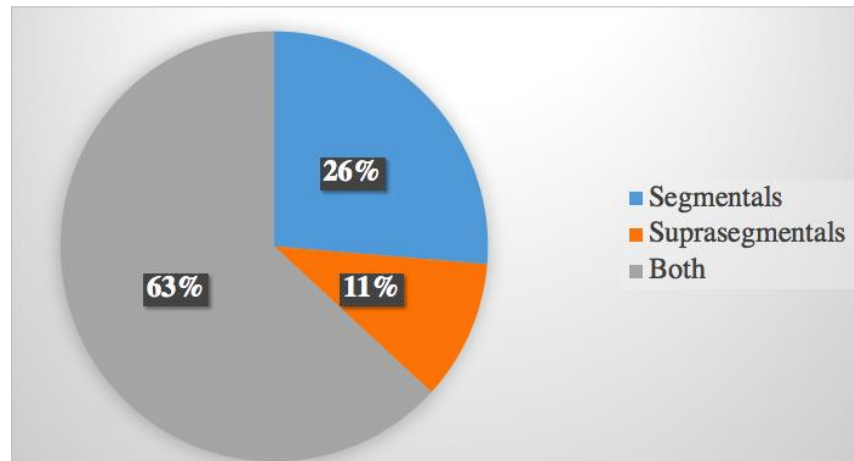


Figure 5. Aspects of pronunciation taught

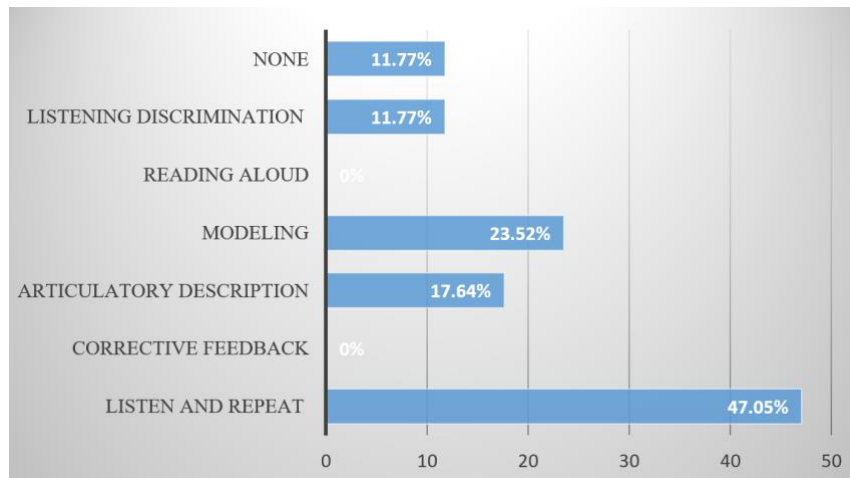


Figure 6. Instructional practices – types of exercises used

Instructors' Beliefs and Attitudes towards Pronunciation

In order to answer RQ3, participants were asked to respond to several questions on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the highest). A large number of participants (25% selected 5, 58% selected 4) stated that they mostly focus on intelligibility in their classrooms (Figure 7). All of them argued that it is very important to have good pronunciation to be perceived as a professional (45% - 5; 55% - 4). The participants' opinions were divided regarding the importance of pronunciation compared to the other skills. Most of the selected answers were 3 and 4, which suggests that teachers may think pronunciation is not more important than other skills. Furthermore, our findings indicated that a large proportion of these teachers mostly consider teaching pronunciation as an important part of teaching EFL courses. Finally, teachers shared their opinion regarding the extent to which accented speech influences the way a language speaker is socially perceived to be a professional. While

60% of them (20% - 5 and 40% - 4) stated that they think accented speech heavily influences listeners' perception, 30% thought it might be moderately important, and 15% considered accented speech as not being important when it comes to listeners' perception of one's professionalism.

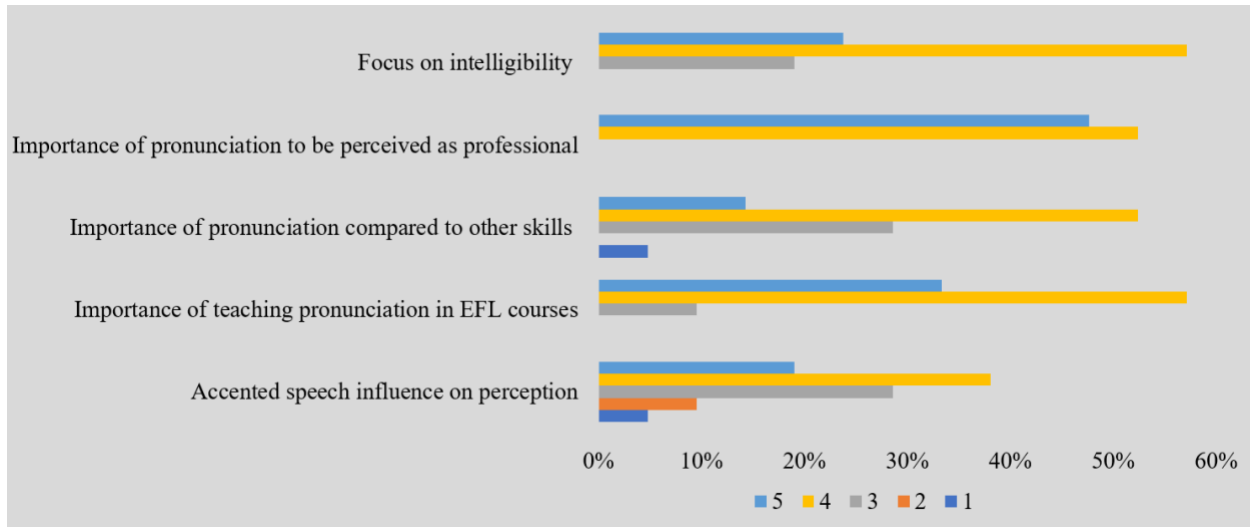


Figure 7. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards pronunciation

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to shed light on the practices, beliefs, and attitudes regarding pronunciation of Macedonian instructors teaching in the Macedonian context. While some of the findings of the study corroborated results from other studies with similar aims conducted in different contexts, other findings open space for further discussion and investigation. One of the less surprising findings were the results in response to the research question related to pronunciation training. As revealed in Henderson et al.'s (2012) section about the rating of training in Macedonia, this study also confirmed that the respondents were more satisfied with the instruction they had received as teachers-in-training than the training they received as students. Similar to other studies, such as Huensch (2019a) and Kirkova-Naskova et al. (2013), the training teachers received was a course in Phonetics and Phonology as part of their degree-seeking studies (Figure 1). However, a majority of the teachers showed high levels of willingness for continued training in any mode (Figure 2). If we were to compare the current findings with the findings presented and discussed in Henderson et al. (2012), we could argue that within a period of several years, pronunciation instruction has not gained a more prominent role in the EFL curriculum, contrary to a plethora of implications and calls for reconsidering the place of pronunciation instruction. With teachers' dissatisfaction still prevailing and their willingness for training being present, these results could be a call for more immediate action when it comes to teacher training, hopefully beyond the level of undergraduate and graduate courses. The increased use of technology and digital tools for educational purposes could perhaps find its place in teacher training programs. Global online courses (GOC) or Massive open online courses (MOOC) for teaching pronunciation might help address this gap.

One of the more surprising results in this study is presented in Figure 5. The finding that 63% of the respondents reported they focus on both segmentals and suprasegmentals in their classroom is contrary to what we had anticipated. While teachers claimed that they incorporated pronunciation in their classrooms, the most common type of exercise used was “listen and repeat.” While only 23% reported using modeling and 17% articulatory exercises, the fact that only 11% reported listening discrimination exercises seems concerning. These findings may suggest that the teachers may not be aware of the importance of perception vs. production exercises and only adopt the exercises they feel comfortable or are familiar with. It was also surprising that none of the teachers reported providing feedback for the learners. The reason for that might be the large number of students in the Macedonian classrooms or fear of discouraging oral communication.

Another finding that was somewhat inconsistent with responses on previous questions is presented in Figure 7. Namely, despite the fact that almost 60% of the respondents claim they focus on intelligibility, around 40% still believe that accented speech influences the way one is perceived as a professional. The contrast between these two reports raises the question of how teachers perceive intelligibility and what they actually do in their classrooms to focus on intelligibility instruction. As Huensch (2019a) argued, there seems to be a tension between accent and intelligibility among instructors. Interesting findings by Nagle et al. (2018) also suggest that teachers may have a preference towards nativelikeness. They propose that “training programs need to communicate more clearly the importance of emphasizing effective communication and pedagogical expertise” (p. 524). In line with this, yet another point that might be worth additional research is how teachers navigate between their teaching practices related to intelligibility as well as their beliefs about the societal stereotypes related to accented speech.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study sheds light on the place pronunciation has in the instruction of English as a foreign language in the Macedonian educational system. At the same time, it detected the teachers’ needs regarding training and resources to teach pronunciation in the EFL classroom. The purpose of this study was to provide a general picture of the situation in small EFL settings, such as Macedonia. The inability to conduct classroom observation studies with the goal of comparing whether the reported practices align with the teachers’ actual practices is perhaps the biggest limitation of this study. The researchers were unable to follow up on the obtained results and confirm the findings through observations as during the time when the study was being conducted, both researchers were studying and teaching in the US. Therefore, for future studies, we would suggest carrying out classroom observation for the purpose of gaining an even better insight into the actual practices and for detecting the spaces for further research or training in a more reliable and informed way. For the time being, it is our hope that this study will be a valuable resource for the designers of Phonetics and Phonology courses at the higher education level as well as a point of reference for teacher trainers in this specific context, but also similar EFL contexts seeking to improve the place of pronunciation in the foreign language instruction.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aleksandra Lazoroska is an MA student in Teaching English as a Second Language at The University of Arizona. She has worked as an EFL teacher in Macedonia. Currently, she is teaching first-year writing courses to domestic and international students at the Writing Program at The University of Arizona. Her academic interests include language socialization, multiliteracies and sociolinguistics and language learning. Email: alazoroska@email.arizona.edu

Agata Guskaroska is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics and Technology at Iowa State University. She's a Fulbright alumna who has taught EFL courses for 7 years and worked as a TA in American literature at FON University. She currently serves as a TA for English composition at Iowa State University. Her major interests include CALL, pronunciation, and sociolinguistics. Email: agatag@iastate.edu

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