English pronunciation in Swedish Upper Secondary School Students

A qualitative study of Swedish students’ pronunciation tendencies

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Abstract

Geographically, Sweden is significantly closer to England as opposed to America, two English speaking countries with two rather different varieties of the language. With regard to Britain’s history of colonization it could be assumed that British English (RP-variety) would be most frequently used globally. However, America’s power position in politics, economics, international businesses, and movie industries have contributed to making the American English (GA-variety) the more predominantly used variety of the two (Barber, 2000, p. 236). In the different varieties, the vowels /əu/ /ou/ /juː/ /uː/ /ɑ:/ /æ/ /ɒ/ /ɑ/ /aɪ/ /iː/ and the consonants /ə/ /r/ /t/ /d/ show the most prominent difference in pronunciation (Navrátilová, 2013). Furthermore, Axelsson (2002, p.144) (in Alftberg, 2009, p. 4) claims that with regard to the previously mentioned factors, Swedish students come in contact with several different varieties of English on a daily basis, thus a one-accen-only approach seems outdated for learning purposes. In addition to this, the syllabus for teaching English in Sweden, LGY11 (SNAE, 2011) lays focus, not explicitly on pronunciation, but on intonation and fluency, two factors which are certainly affected by one’s pronunciation and prosody. The document also emphasizes the importance of incorporating different varieties of English from different English speaking cultures and countries into the lessons (SNAE, 2011).

This raised the question of whether or not Swedish upper secondary school students tend to follow the global Americanization of pronunciation, if they still adhere to using RP due to its geographical proximity and former prestige, or if they mix different varieties. Therefore, a study was conducted on Swedish students’ pronunciation tendencies and attitudes towards different pronunciations. 58% of the students claimed to use GA and said that TV/YouTube is where they hear English the most. Only 17% claimed they used RP. However, the recordings of the students indicated that the majority used a mixture of the two, and only one student was completely consistent in their variety.

Keywords
English pronunciation, Sweden, General American, Received Pronunciation, Teaching, Upper secondary school
1. Introduction

Whether or not English is a lingua franca or “world language” is still being debated. What is certain, however, is the fact that English is a globally spoken language, and possessing the ability to comprehend it provides a great advantage in many tasks—everything from configuring a new TV with an English instruction manual to communicating with businesses located far away from one another. One can go as far as to say that English is a language of all nations. However, certainly not all countries have English as an official language, but most countries offer English as a foreign language education in school to different extents.

Sweden is such a country. Swedish is the country’s official language, but since 1999, children are required to start English language education as early as in year 1. In addition to this, Sweden has seen a bloom in English oriented private schools, and today children are offered the possibility to be surrounded by the English language from their first day of kindergarten. Thereafter, there are national tests that are used in all schools to determine the student’s proficiency level in three core subjects that are deemed most important in Swedish education. Those subjects are Swedish, mathematics, and—English. The English national test examines the students’ proficiency level in listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing. The more advanced course of English (Eng. 7), which is not obligatory, does not have a national test but a course test which is quite similar to the national test. However, at this level, the students are also tested on their production (speaking) skills.

Education first (EF), which is world leading in international language learning, conducts studies on English proficiency in Europe annually. Sweden has been rated within the top three of highest English proficiency level over the last six years. Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland have all been in the top place according to that same study. In the most recent EF study, Sweden placed third. This is thought to be a result of Denmark’s and the Netherlands’ average score going up and Sweden’s score going down just slightly. Nevertheless, Swedes’ English proficiency level is unmistakably very high (Svenska Dagbladet, 15 Nov, 2016).

Even though Sweden has been top-rated in proficiency tests and offers English language education from a very early age, there is one aspect of English language learning that is seldom mentioned, nevertheless quite important in ultimate language attainment—namely pronunciation.
Worldwide, there is an uncountable number of English varieties. There are pidginized versions of the language, varieties that have developed through trading, region-specific varieties, and even accents within each region. There are also varieties of English that are pronounced with foreign sounding accents, which brings the number of varieties even higher. However, if we focus on native varieties of English, the number decreases. If we narrow it down even further and only focus on countries where English is the official language we find varieties that are most commonly mentioned in educational contexts. These varieties include, but are not limited to American, Canadian, British, Scottish, Irish, and Australian. Certainly there are some African and Asian countries that use English as their official language, but the aforementioned varieties are the most frequently encountered varieties in national tests and education material.

When looking at the English language from a historical perspective, one can assume that British English has been the most influential variety of them all considering the country’s history of colonization. Additionally, from a Swedish perspective, England is much closer to Sweden geographically, thus it is not strange that this variety has been the main influencer in English language education in Sweden. Previously it was considered the correct way of pronunciation, and today most textbooks still adhere to the British variety. However, the years of colonization as history books tell are over, and since then, the English language has taken root and developed in many different directions. The English-speaking regions have created standardized dialects of the different varieties. Usually these standardized versions were the more prestigious version of the variety.

In England, Received Pronunciation (RP) has taken on that role, and the equivalent for the United States of America is General American (GA). The two varieties are easily understood by one another, but they are significantly different when looking at a phonetic level. The vowels \( /əu/ /ou/ /ju:/ /ʌː/ /æːl/ /ɒ/ /ɑːl/ /iː/ \) and the consonants \( /ə/ /r/ /t/ /d/ \) show the greatest difference in pronunciation (Navrátilová, 2013).

The variety that is spoken by most native speakers is GA. GA has also emerged as the dominant variety in international corporations and the entertainment industry thanks to Hollywood (Alftberg, 2009). Also, the access to English-speaking media among young adults has increased extensively with streaming services and the use of social media. Furthermore, since the United States has risen to become a huge economic and political power, that variety has extended into multinational congregations as well. Axelsson (2002) means that this global influence of GA can be observed in Swedish students as well. In addition to this, the Swedish
National Agency for Education (SNAE) has changed the curricula regarding varieties of English and today it is required of teachers to offer learning material that includes many different varieties of English.

This raised the following questions that led to this study:

- What variety of English do Swedish upper secondary school students use today?
- Can their media consumption be an indicator of which variety they favor?
- What variety of English do they encounter the most, and where?

The purpose of this investigative study is to gain an understanding of what differentiates the two varieties of GA and RP and how the different varieties are reflected in Swedish students’ individual production. It will also investigate if there is a link between the students’ media consumption and their preferred variety. Finally, the study will also involve a discussion on whether or not English should be taught at earlier ages with consideration to critical periods in language acquisition.

2. Background

Different varieties of English have developed globally over the centuries. Many have been influenced by neighboring countries and some have developed due to colonization or trading. In this essay, a variety refers to a generalized version of the language which can be tied to a specific country e.g. American, British, Australian, Scottish, among others. Whereas most, if not all countries, are home to different dialects of the same language, variety will be used as an umbrella term to refer to the most common and well-studied dialect of the country. In this case, focus is mainly put on two varieties: American English and British English.

As mentioned, varieties contain many different dialects, but this study will focus on two specific dialects which will represent each variety, namely General American (GA) for the American variety and Received Pronunciation (RP) for the British variety.

2.1 General American and Received Pronunciation

In Britain, RP is viewed as the “model accent” which is why this variety was chosen to represent British English. RP is also frequently referred to as “Queen’s English” and has been a rather
prestigious accent as it was spoken by the aristocracy and well-educated (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 8). The prestige of the accent has several popular culture references, one of the most popular one being the play *Pygmalion* (Shaw, 1913) and the filmatization *My Fair Lady* (Cukor, 1964), both of which delve into the posh identity of the accent and the prestige that the dialect indicates. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it is the version of British English that has been most fully described (Roach, in Navrátilová, 2013, p. 8). Thus, the phonetic characteristics of RP serve to represent the British variety of English in this study.

While General American derives from the British English that was used during the colonialization of the British Isles, it has later developed and taken on both a different sound and in many cases also a different spelling, e.g. $s \rightarrow z$ as in *normalise/normalize* or the removal of $u$ as in *colour/color* (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 8).

GA is the American equivalent of RP and has served as the more prestigious version of English among American accents. Thus it will be used in this essay as a counterpart to RP in order to represent an American variety of English. Besides, although America is significantly larger in size than the UK, the dialect variation is much smaller. This is the reason why GA has become known as a model accent for the United States (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 9).

With regard to media, both RP and GA are the most frequently encountered dialects in both TV shows and movies. RP has even been called BBC English since most TV broadcasters on the BBC use this variety (Navrátilová, 2013 p. 8). They are also the versions one is expected to find in a textbook. However, Tottie (2002) mentions that British textbooks with the RP variety are more commonly used in Europe than their American (GA) counterpart. Thus, it has always been more natural to teach RP in European schools since the course material corresponds to that variety.

In contrast to this educational aspect, Swedish people are offered a plethora of American TV-shows, movies, music and news. In fact, GA is the dominating variety of English in many big international industries, mainly due to the fact that a majority of the native speakers are American (Tottie, 2002). Barber (2000) argues that thanks to America’s economic and political power position, GA has become the more widely spread variety in news, international businesses, and political settings (p. 236). Thus, a non-native English speaker is more likely to encounter GA than RP in non-educational settings where English is used.

If we disregard the cultural aspects and focus on the phonetic differences, one can easily pinpoint a few rather noticeable differences between the two varieties. The subsections
that follow are divided into *vowels* and *consonants* and each section will explain the differences between the RP and GA pronunciation.

### 2.1.1 Vowels

The description of vowels varies, and it is not always easy to find one that explains them to their full extent. However, a sufficient description of a vowel would be that vowels are voiced sounds that are produced by a non-obstructed airstream while they are shaped by the lips and tongue (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 10). Vowels can either be monophthongs where the syllable only contains one vowel sound such as the ‘a’ in *cat* (/kæt/), or they can be diphthongs, meaning they are a combination of two vowel sounds in the same syllable such as the ‘a’ in *Kate* (/keɪt/). Diphthongs are also known as gliding vowels because of their change in pronunciation where they start as one vowel and then move towards another. Figure 1 illustrates the articulation of English vowels and demonstrates where and how each of them is pronounced. Vowels followed by a colon are long vowels. To state an example, the *i* in *ship* and *ee* in *sheep* are both pronounced as /i:/ but one is longer, thus, it is written out as /iː:/. In GA there is only one diphthong which differentiates it from RP, namely /ɔːu/, which is replaced by /ou/ in GA. These will be compared below.

![Vowel articulation chart](image)

**Figure 1. Vowel articulation chart.**

Source: Navrátilová, 2013

/**/ and /ɑ/

The RP vowel /ɒ/ as in *pod* or *dog* corresponds to /ɑ/ in GA. It is very similar to a shorter version of the RP *a* in *hard*. Darragh (in Navrátilová, 2013, p. 14) claims that in GA the vowels have lost their sharpness and become more neutralized, meaning they are not as stressed in GA as in RP. For example, *don* and *dawn* are pronounced the same way in GA whereas in RP the vowels have kept their sharpness.
/ə:/ and /æ/
The vowel /æ/ used in words such as can’t, bath, laugh or dance is used in GA whereas in RP the longer vowel /ɑ:/ is preferred. Although, in this case, it is not GA that has changed, but rather RP. This is thought to have changed during the 1700’s (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 14).

/ju:/ and /u:/
Another difference is in the pronunciation of /u:/ in words such as tune, new, during, or suit. RP favors the usage of /j/ before /u:/ whereas GA favors omitting it, and only pronounces /u:/ without the /j/. The shift from /ju:/ to /u:/ is probably a result of the fact that it is harder to adjust the tongue from near the gum ridge to the hard palate, thus the /j/ was dropped.

/əu/ and /ou/
As mentioned earlier, this is the only diphthong that is different in GA and RP. While both varieties share other diphthongs such as /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /aʊ/, the RP /əu/ has been replaced by /ou/ in GA. In RP it developed from the long back half-open vowel /ɔ:, such as ou in soul, and oe in toe and became a diphthong that starts with /ə/ and then closes towards /ʊ/. In GA, the /əu/ developed into the diphthong /ou/ (Navrátilová, 2013, p. 15).

/ɑɪ/ and /iː/
The diphthong /ɑɪ/ in RP as in neither and either has been replaced by the long vowel /iː/ in their GA counterpart. Interestingly enough, this GA pronunciation is also found in Scottish English, which, geographically, is located significantly closer to England than America.

2.1.2 Consonants

/ɑ/ and /r/
A rhotic accent is an accent where /r/ is always pronounced. GA and Canadian English are two American examples of rhotic accents. However, Scottish and Irish are also rhotic whereas RP is non-rhotic and instead uses the neutral vowel /ə/. A non-rhotic accent does not discard the /r/ completely though. It is pronounce before vowels, but only then. If the /r/ is followed by a consonant or if it is at the end of the word the /r/ is either not pronounced at all or the vowel preceding the /r/ is lengthened or replaced by a /ə/. This means that words like nervous, car or water are pronounced /nə:vəs/, /kɑː/ and /wɔːtə/.

Rhoticity is also the reason why GA does not have more diphthongs. While a speaker of RP pronounces the word here as /hɪə/, a speaker of GA simply pronounces the /r/ and the word becomes /hɪr/ instead.
Finally, there is also a difference when pronouncing unstressed syllables containing /t/ or /d/. For an English as a foreign language/English as a second language (EFL/ESL) learner, the RP variety might be easier to grasp as there is always a distinct difference between /t/ and /d/. The difference in pronunciation between words like latter/ladder is unmistakable, whereas in GA both of the two sound like ladder.

2.2 L1 transfer in pronunciation settings

When looking into any kind of second language acquisition (SLA) research, there is one factor that is always of importance. That is the possibility of first language (L1) transfer. L1 transfer is described as an occurrence where something in the native language and something in the target language are similar to each other and the L1 structure is transferred to the L2 (Odlin, T. 2003, p. 454 in Ortega, 2009, p.33). This includes both pronunciation and grammatical structures where the learner can bridge a gap in their L2 knowledge by relying on their L1 knowledge. The transfer can both help and inhibit L2 acquisition, depending on whether the similarities have the same syntactical or semantical meaning.

The L1 transfer happens when the learner makes an interlingual identification, which means that the learner can make a conscious, strategic choice to bridge the said gap, but it does not always have to be conscious (Ortega, 2009, p.33). In fact, sometimes the transfer happens spontaneously or on impulse due to extreme similarities in the L1 and L2. While this is certainly shaped and controlled by the L2 learner’s proficiency level, sometimes the distance between the two languages is just too small. Words that fall under the title “false friends” are one example of such a transfer instance. For example, The Swedish word varuhus and the English word warehouse are similar in spelling, but one means department store and the other is a storage facility. However, for this study we will solely focus on pronunciation transfer.

Regarding pronunciation, the L1 transfer is more commonly known as a foreign sounding accent. This kind of transfer means that the L2 learner applies pronunciation, intonation and prosody from their L1 to their L2. For this study, it is hard to predict to what extent such transfer will occur, but the theory of critical periods in language acquisition is one viewpoint that should be taken into consideration as it may explain L1 transfer in pronunciation.

To elaborate, in 1988, Tim Scovel conducted a study on whether or not pronunciation has a critical period during which it needs to be acquired. The evidence from the
study showed a significant increase of foreign sounding accents in L2 speakers who learned the language later in life as opposed to those who acquired it earlier (Ortega, 2009, p. 22). Scovel (1988) claims that since pronunciation is the only part of language that is not simply internal, but directly physical, it is one of the language-learning aspects that requires neuromuscular programming which is why pronunciation acquisition has a special status in theories of critical periods (Ortega, 2009, p. 22).

In addition to this, Flege (1999) explains foreign-sounding accents to be caused by the extensive experience of the learner’s L1. He states that by the age of five to seven, phonetic categories, i.e. internal schematics of speech sounds in the L1 become fixed, and any new non-salient phonetic patterns will be more difficult to process as they will be filtered through the L2 learner’s L1 (Flege, 1999 p. 125). Flege suggests that foreign sounding accents are not the result of the learner’s inability to learn how to pronounce, but the difficulties may stem from the fact that the learner has already learnt how to pronounce their L1 so well (Flege, 1999, p. 125).

However, Ortega (2009) claims that it is too early to proclaim if and why critical periods for L2 learning exist as rather conflicting evidence continuously emerges across quite diverse fields of research (Ortega, 2009 p.25). But the emerging theories do have one common denominator, and that is the notion that pronunciation (and all L2 acquisition) generally shows higher levels of ultimate attainment when L2 education begins at an earlier age. Thus, whether L1 pronunciation transfer, or foreign-sounding accents, are a result of early neuromuscular programming or extensive L1 knowledge, the fact remains that L1 transfer is expected to occur when the learner begins their SLA later in life. This theory is of relevance for this study as the participating students’ early EFL education followed an old agreement based on the EFL-project Engelska på lågastadiet (EPÅL). In the older regulations, it was decided that English education should start in year 3, which overshoots Flege’s alleged critical period for acquiring phonetic categories. Thus, L1 transfer in pronunciation may be expected in the study.

### 2.3 English in Swedish upper secondary schools

In Sweden, all curricula are mandated by the Swedish National Agency for Education or SNAE (Swe. Skolverket). This means that teachers are allowed to find their own teaching material, and structure their lessons freely, but there are national frameworks on what needs to be included in different courses and what skills the students are to be evaluated and graded on.
The LGY11, which is the curriculum for upper secondary schools, does not explicitly state that only one variety of English is to be taught and used in EFL education. On the contrary, it states that: "The [English language] education shall in all aspects of importance be held in English. In the [English language] education, the students shall encounter spoken and written English of different varieties, as well as put the learning material in relation to their own knowledge and experiences" (SNAE, 2011, note: translated from Swedish for this study). The document continues: “The students shall be given the opportunity to use their language skills in functional and meaningful contexts, and to create multifaceted communicative skills. Such skills involve reception […], production, and interaction, which means to […] adapt their language to different situations, purposes, and audiences” (SNAE, 2011). In addition to this, the grading criteria for English do not focus on varieties of the language until the most advanced course, English 7, where it explicitly states that students are to understand different sociolects as well as dialects of English, even at a rapid (native) pace. They do, however, focus on intonation and precision, but such expressions are not clarified, which makes it rather ambiguous whether or not pronunciation is something to be explicitly focused on. The impact of this ambiguity in the curriculum will be discussed more thoroughly under the “discussion” section.

2.4 Previous studies on Swedish students’ pronunciation

There have been plenty of research done on English variation among Swedish students. In 1999, Mobärg (2002) conducted a study on pronunciation and found that 64% of students used RP, and only 24% used GA, meaning a majority favors the geographically closer variety.

Later, Söderlund and Modiano (2002) tested Swedish students’ varieties based on their translation of certain target words which differ in British English and American English and found that a majority (73.4%) chose BrE for fall/autumn, whereas only 28% favored BrE for truck/lorry. Regarding candy/sweets, only 7.8% translated the word into BrE (Söderlund & Modiano, 2002, p. 159). They drew no conclusions on which variety was most preferable among students, but the results indicate an interesting mixture of the two vernaculars.

In 2002, Axelsson (2002) conducted a study on Swedish students’ pronunciation attitudes and found that 26% of women and 33% of men assume they use GA. She also found that 33% of women and 44% of men believed they mixed BrE and AmE and credits this to the major influence of American TV-shows, movies, music, businesses etc. She also claims that
this makes it evident that schools need to dismiss a one-accent-only approach in ESL learning, as pronunciation is clearly changing.

Finally, Thörnstrand (2008) found that 68.8% of female and 58.7% of male students used GA, which is a remarkable increase from the study by Axelsson in 2002. However, it is noteworthy that many previous studies only investigate the students’ perceived pronunciation, i.e. the variety they believe they use. While this study will take that aspect into consideration, it also aims to research the actual pronunciation which will make the results comparable to Thörnstrand’s study.

2.5 Social media as a tool for language learning

As previously mentioned, many studies have been conducted on Swedish students’ pronunciation attitudes and tendencies, but there is one circumstance that needs to be addressed. Most of them were conducted 10-20 years ago and since then the exposure to English through media has increased drastically. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etcetera, are teeming with native English speaking influencers and vloggers. American streaming services such as Netflix and HBO are now available in Sweden, and international food chains such as Starbucks employ English speakers at their Swedish locations.

Additionally, the said online services have been made easily accessible thanks to technological advancements. Since the study by Mobärg in 1999, Internet service providers have dropped their prices significantly while they have also increased their streaming capacity. Technology has become cheaper, and ICT and programming have made their way into Swedish curricula. In fact, a majority of upper secondary schools use a 1-1 computer system, i.e. all students receive their own personal school laptop. Even pre-schools and kindergartens use tablets for learning purposes.

In sum, Swedish students (and Swedes in general) have the possibility to be influenced by English media every day, whether it is conscious or unconscious, and the exposure begins at a very low age. These circumstances emphasizes the notion of social media as a language learning tool.

A study on YouTube as a pronunciation teacher (Aydin, 2004 in Nurfitri, 2014) emphasizes the importance of the Internet for English Language Teaching (ELT), and the study included a survey where the participants had to answer whether or not the Internet (YouTube) had helped them develop their pronunciation skills. The study found that 80% of the participants
claimed that their pronunciation skills increased thanks to YouTube, and 12% answered that it had helped them to some extent. Only 8% claimed that the Internet was not very useful for language learning (Nurfitri, 2014).

Furthermore, River (1981) claims that adding an audio-visual representation, meaning hearing and seeing the language being used simultaneously, of the target language is helpful in learning since it provides an indirect cultural understanding for the various people who speak it which makes it easier for the L2 learner to produce similar sounds and sentences (River, 1981 in Nurfitri, 2014). In addition to this, Ortega (2009) mentions the act of unintentional learning, meaning learning that occurs while the L2 learner is not actively trying to learn. This is precisely what happens when the learner is exposed to English speaking environments (e.g. YouTube, TV-shows and movies) and develops a deeper understanding for the production of English sounds without actively participating in learning activities.

To conclude, GA and RP are rather different phonetically, and this study focuses on the previously mentioned differences in pronunciation. In Sweden, teachers are not required to teach one specific pronunciation, but rather expose the students to an array of different varieties. However, thanks to the increased access to the Internet and streaming services, students will be exposed to plenty of English regardless of them being in school or not. This constant media exposure, Scovel’s theory of pronunciation acquisition, and Ortega’s theory of unintentional learning, create the foundation for this study which will be thoroughly described in the section below.

3. Methods

In short, the study was conducted by having a set of students read a short text out loud as well as 5 words, which all have a specific phonetic variety in GA and RP (see Appendix A). All students were recorded and the recordings were reviewed and analyzed shortly thereafter. They were also asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their English listening habits, and previous English learning experiences (see Appendix B).

The method for acquiring the data for this study is based on the notion of ensuring validity and reliability. As Gass & Mackey (2011) mention it is important to gather information on how frequently a phenomenon occurs in a sufficient way (p. 4). However, they also mention the difficulties in capturing particular constructs, in this case pronunciation, and suggest that
consideration to specific factors in the target groups’ English speaking background might aid in creating validity (Gass & Mackey, 2011, p. 4). Thus, the data gathered was not only oral production, but also a questionnaire which took some additional factors into consideration in order to ensure construct validity (see appendix B). I will discuss this further under “primary data acquisition”.

Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2001, p. 348) as well as Valdman (1993, p. 505) mention in Gass & Mackey (2011, p. 11) that all valid and reliable SLA research should pass the test of replication and that all observations has to be verifiable by other researchers who use the same method. Therefore, the questionnaire as well as the text and set of words the students read out loud are enclosed in Appendix A.

However, one also needs to consider the nature of this study in order to fully understand the research’s limitations in replication. Firstly, the set of students observed in a study of this sort will differ every time, and if the same set of students are studied the results may be different since they are already familiar with the intended outcome of said study (Gass & Mackey, 2011, p. 11-12). Secondly, a research of this kind is quite time consuming with regard to listening carefully to the recordings of each student. Thus, the number of students included in the study may be too small to make generalizations. Additionally, all students were from the same year at the same school, thus the results represent a rather homogenous group.

### 3.1 Primary data acquisition

With the previously mentioned concepts of validity and reliability in mind, a thorough description of the data collection follows in this section. The respondents for this research are 36 students from three different classes in year 2 at an upper secondary school in Stockholm, Sweden. The school is quite prestigious and applying students need a rather high admission score to enter. The respondents are, as mentioned, a rather homogenous group both socially and with regard to proficiency level, thus the results can indicate pronunciation trends for this specific kind of students. To my advantage, the study was conducted at their school which provides them with an environment in which they are used to talking English. This may help in creating a more accurate result, according to Jones et al (2008). However, since the students are high-performing and result-driven it was of importance to announce that their participation would only be used in this study in order to encourage them to use what most represents their casual English pronunciation.
In fact, when introducing this study to the students I intended to keep their environment as “pronunciation-neutral” as possible. Thus, all instructions were given in Swedish to minimize the risk of my pronunciation transferring onto theirs. Additionally, the students were not informed that this research focused on pronunciation, but rather that it was a research on English among upper secondary school students in Sweden. With this in consideration, they were told that they would be recorded reading a short text that would contribute to the aforementioned research. It was not until the end of the spoken part of the research that they were familiarized with the true purpose of the study. Thereafter, they filled in the questionnaire (appendix B) where they gave some information on what kind of English interactions they have on a daily basis. They also had to estimate how much time was spent with each medium per week. Another factor of interest was whether or not the respondents had spent a longer period of time in an English-speaking country as this may affect and to some extent explain their pronunciation tendencies.

In a subsequent study, this method might need some revising. The students responded to semi-structured questions, and question 1 might have been more successful in yielding clear results if it clearly defined what English speaking TV-shows or movies they watch as someone answered with both Swedish TV-shows or movies they watch as well as English speaking ones. However, this was a minor flaw and did not affect the overall result.

After gathering the primary data, the recordings were carefully analyzed and the keywords with a phonetic significance [suit, new, dog, toe, laughed, nervously, better, either, neither, journey, tune, during, soul, don, and dawn] were categorized as either GA, RP or Unclear. Words that fell under the category unclear were instances where the respondent did not pronounce the word as either GA or RP. This was quite common for the word “journey” where they usually pronounced the word with a “sloppy” /r/, which made it hard to distinguish whether it was there or if it was dropped as in the RP variety. In some cases the respondents stumbled upon words and re-read them differently from the first time. Such instances were also classified as unclear and were mostly occurring for laughed and better (see Table 1).

3.1.1 Ethical principles in data collecting

Prior to the study, all students were made aware that all data gathered would be properly treated in accordance with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines and principles. They were informed about my background in the teaching program and the nature of the study. However, as previously mentioned, they were not made aware of what specific areas I would be studying until after the recordings were done. As mentioned, this was done to keep a neutral
pronunciation on the students’ behalf and to ensure that they would not be influenced by any misconceptions about the study. However, as the Swedish Research Council’s codex states, to remain honest with my intentions of the study, the students were given the option to withdraw their participation at any given point. No student chose to do so.

All students gave their consent to participating in the study orally on the above mentioned recordings prior to them reading the text. The students kept their anonymity throughout the study and each recording and questionnaire was assigned a number ranging from 1-36 in order to keep track of them for analysis purposes.

Finally, the students were provided with my e-mail address through which they will be able to contact me and view the final result of the study. They were also informed that the final product would be used in a defense seminar. Thus, it will be read by other students in the same program as myself, as well as by supervisors, and examiners.

4. Results

4.1 Perceived pronunciation and actual pronunciation

In the survey, the students were asked to define what variety of English they think they use. This was done so that the results from the survey can be put in comparison to the study of Axelsson (2002) and Thörnstrand (2008). 58% claimed they used GA and only 17% claimed they used RP. Another 17% believed they mixed

![Diagram](image.png)

Figure 2. Shows the percentage of participants’ perceived pronunciation, i.e. what variety of English they believe they speak. All unanswered tokens are marked as non-applicable (n/a).
different varieties or used something other than GA/RP and 8% did not answer the question (see fig. 2).

The above mentioned results were rather straightforward and fairly easy to interpret, but when investigating the students’ *actual* pronunciation by listening to them reading the assigned text (see appendix A), the results immediately became more complex. Among the 58% who claimed to use GA only one (1) student was consistent in their use of GA. Said student did have a background of living in the United States for two months, which may offer an explanation to their consistency, but another student who had spent two months in Canada (General Canadian and GA are very similar) was not as consistent in their variety. Among the students, the longest time spent in an English speaking country was two months, which applied to three (3) students, two of whom I have already mentioned. The third one had spent two months in England, and used RP in all but one of the target words (*journey*).

Table 1 illustrates the spreading among all target words and whether they were pronounced in GA, RP, or unclear. *Journey* was particularly hard to categorize as it was usually pronounced more than once since the respondents stumbled upon the word repeatedly and changed their pronunciation when re-reading the word. The word is still included in the results, but that instance was too imprecise to draw any conclusions on, thus it will be discarded from the discussion. In all instances except for *new*, *laughed*, *tune*, and *during* GA is the dominating variety. Furthermore, as seen in the table, in the instances where GA is dominating, it actually has a rather large majority in most cases. However, towards the end of the table are the words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target word</th>
<th>GA (%)</th>
<th>RP (%)</th>
<th>Unclear (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suit</td>
<td>27 (75%)</td>
<td>9 (25%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>17 (47.2%)</td>
<td>18 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>20 (55.6%)</td>
<td>16 (44.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toe</td>
<td>22 (66.1%)</td>
<td>14 (38.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughed</td>
<td>9 (25%)</td>
<td>25 (69.4%)</td>
<td>2 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervously</td>
<td>27 (73%)</td>
<td>7 (19.4%)</td>
<td>2 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better</td>
<td>29 (80.6%)</td>
<td>4 (11.1%)</td>
<td>3 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either</td>
<td>30 (83.3%)</td>
<td>6 (16.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>31 (86.1%)</td>
<td>5 (13.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>25 (69.4%)</td>
<td>6 (16.7%)</td>
<td>5 (13.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tune</td>
<td>9 (25%)</td>
<td>27 (75%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During</td>
<td>14 (38.9%)</td>
<td>21 (58.3%)</td>
<td>1 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul</td>
<td>22 (61.1%)</td>
<td>14 (38.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>19 (52.8%)</td>
<td>16 (44.4%)</td>
<td>1 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>23 (63.9%)</td>
<td>13 (36.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Distribution of varieties for each target word. The five last words were read from a vocabulary list and all preceding words were intertextual.
that were read from a list as opposed to in a textual context, and interestingly enough there is a regression in differences between GA and RP on said words. This finding is rather interesting and will be debated further under ‘discussion’.

Regarding overall pronunciation and disregarding the specific target words, the majority of the students tend to use a rhotic sounding variety (GA). However, most students also have a foreign-sounding (Swedish) accent with regard to pitch, intonation, and prosody. However, the focus for this study was phonetic differences and those results indicate that GA is the predominating variety in most cases, although RP is favored in more instances than expected. Additionally, as previously mentioned, when listening to the students’ pronunciation as a whole, it becomes evident that the students are leaning towards a rhotic variety, meaning they pronounce ‘r’ in almost all cases which is typical for GA.

### 4.2 Most frequently encountered varieties of English

In the survey, the students were asked to pinpoint which English variety they are being taught in school. Only one (1) person claimed that many different varieties were being taught, while 9 and 29 participants chose GA and RP respectively (see fig. 3). To examine what variety the

![Figure 3. This graph shows what variety of English the respondents encounter in different settings. All instances where the respondents did not answer the question, or claimed they did not use the said media the answer has been noted as N/A. In cases where participants have checked or logged more than one alternative all appropriate categories have gotten a note, which is why the total is not always 36 in each category.](image-url)
students most frequently encounter through different media they were asked to write what TV-shows, movies and YouTubers they watch. Each reply was then investigated to determine whether they use GA or RP. Fig. 3 indicates that in all categories the predominantly used variety among the TV-shows, movies, and YouTubers mentioned in the questionnaire, is GA. In fact, there were only two (2) different TV-shows mentioned where RP is used: Game of Thrones, and Top Gear.

Noteworthy is the fact that many of the participants did have English-speaking relatives, and the majority were from England. However, as previously mentioned, not many of the respondents had lived abroad for an extended period of time, and the overall impact of English-speaking relatives appears to be minimal.

Finally, the students were also asked in what way they believe pronunciation is most efficiently acquired, and the results were quite evenly distributed. Eight (8) participants believed production exercises are the best approach. Thirteen (13) believed exclusively receptive exercises outperforms other approaches, and twelve (12) claims that a combination of the two is necessary for ultimate attainment.

5. Discussion

To sum up the results, unsurprisingly, GA seems to be the variety most students aim for, according to the survey. Regarding their overall pronunciation, the students do use a more rhotic accent, namely GA. In this specific set of students, only one (1) participant was consistent in a non-rhotic accent (RP) as mentioned previously. Additionally, even though the dominating English variety in TV-shows and movies was GA, the target word pronunciation results yielded a rather even spreading between GA and RP.

This allows for a recollection of the research questions for the study:

- What variety of English do Swedish upper secondary school students use today?
- Can their media consumption be an indicator of which kind they favor?
- What variety of English do they encounter the most, and where?

All three questions can be answered fairly simply. GA is the preferred variety. GA is also the variety they encounter the most in movies/TV-shows, which can explain the students’
preferences. But, truthfully, these answers are not enough to explain the pronunciation phenomena. As the results indicated, GA is the more favorable variety, but what is striking is the inconsistency in pronunciation. In the subsection below I will try to explain this more in-depth.

5.1 Inconsistency in results
What is interesting here is that when targeting specific words that show a significant phonetic difference in GA and RP, the results were remarkably similar to studies conducted over 10 years ago. Better, either, and neither were pronounced in GA in more than 80% of the cases. A level of preference which the RP variety did not reach in any instances. However, tune, during, and laughed were all pronounced over 50% in RP. One may assume that perhaps this inconsistency is a result of the influence of the RP that is being taught in school, and the variety they encounter the most outside of school (GA). But I would argue that such a claim does not offer a sufficient explanation as it completely disregards the possibility of L1 transfer.

In fact, when looking at some of the target words with large distribution between GA and RP one finds that some share a similar pronunciation pattern in Swedish. If we use the word ‘dog’ as an example, the results show that 20 and 16 used GA and RP respectively. For L1 speakers of Swedish, the ‘o’ would more naturally be pronounced as the RP /ɒ/ as this follows the similarity to the Swedish pattern of pronunciation where the o before a hard consonant is pronounced /ɔ/. To explain further, the word ‘podcast’ (Swe. ‘podd’) uses the /ɒ/ instead of the GA /ɑ/ and ‘dog’ follows the same pronunciation pattern. The same theory can be applied to the word ‘nervously’ which was pronounced in GA in 75% of the cases. In the Swedish translation ‘nervöst’ the ‘r’ is always pronounced just as in the rhotic GA.

In contrast to that idea, one explanation may also be found in school-related words contrasting relaxed every-day words. Dog, for example, is a rather basic word which is acquired in school at a relatively young age. If we then assume that most EFL education is held in British English, this may explain why such words as dog, laughed, or during fell under the RP category in many instances. However, this study is too small to determine whether this theory is correct or not, but it is an interesting point to bear in mind.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the difference in spreading among intertextual words and words that were being read from a list. As seen in table 1, the five last words have a rather even spreading between GA and RP, and the difference in preference
becomes less evident here. What is of importance here is the idea of setting. This means that when the students read a non-formal text, they may be more likely to produce a more natural pronunciation as opposed to when they read words from a vocabulary list. The latter creates a rather formal setting, which may, consciously or unconsciously, reveal the RP tendencies that come with the notion of a more formal school setting. However, these final theories are based on the notion of all Swedish EFL education being held in RP, and require further studies to provide evidential support. Nonetheless it is something that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the said results.

5.2 Media consumption and English variety
The results of this study revealed that students claim to hear English in TV-shows, movies, and on YouTube the most, but as previously stated, the study relies on self-reporting which should be taken into consideration when analyzing the results. As fig. 3 indicates, the predominating variety in the said media is GA. In addition to this, Axelsson (2002) claims that the one-accent only approach is outdated since Swedish students are quite likely to continue their use of GA in school due to the influence of extramural English. When putting this statement parallel to the findings of this study, it is rather striking that GA has not taken more ground in Swedish schools. It seems Axelsson (2002) was correct in her assumption that GA will be present in Swedish schools in the future, but the idea of GA growing may in some aspects be dismissed since that study is 16 years old, and the results from both studies are principally the same. However, as mentioned, most students do use a more rhotic accent overall, but there are some phonetic differences that disrupts the accent. One explanation may be that the students are in fact affected by the English-speaking media they consume, but that there are traces of previous phonetic patterns, as Flege (1999) suggested, which makes them pronounce certain things closer to their L1 or earlier acquired language.

Another aspect to consider is whether or not the media exposure actually affects pronunciation skills. Nurfitri (2014) found that 80% believed YouTube to be helpful in pronunciation training, and that may very well be the case. However, if watching TV, movies or YouTube is not explicitly done with the purpose of practicing pronunciation, can they really be used to acquire one specific variety of English? One can argue that the idea of unconscious or implicit learning supports media as language teachers, but the aspect of critical periods for language acquisition needs to be considered.
As mentioned, all students in this study began their EFL education with an older educational framework where teaching EFL occurs after the critical period. Today, EFL education starts at even lower ages and perhaps a study on the same topic in 10 years would yield different results.

### 5.3 Including different varieties of English for EFL education in Swedish schools

One major question that arose during this study was: ‘Is the goal for all non-native speakers of English to sound like native speakers?’ When looking at the curricula for English 5 and 6 it does not seem like it. The students are to encounter different varieties of English in school. Whether the varieties come in the form of listening comprehension, movies, news segments or the teacher varying their spoken accent is unclear, but they are required to come in contact with different varieties and cultures.

In English 7, however, the course immediately takes a more advanced stance, as the course requirements state that students should be able to understand different accents at a fast (native) pace. For the grade A, all courses require good intonation, but the document does not specify exactly what that includes which highlights the issue of the document’s ambiguity. Considering the results of this study, should any student be given an A? As mentioned, the inconsistency was predominating, but there were no difficulties in understanding the students’ pronunciation. Additionally, if teachers are to expose the students to all different varieties of English, but never help them to distinguish between the varieties, then is this criterion legitimized as a foundation for skill testing? Certainly, this debate is too large for this study, but it is noteworthy that the grading criteria of Swedish English-courses’ curricula contains contradicting aspects than the course plan. Namely the fact that one mentions prosody and intonation as grading criteria, whereas the other focuses on including different varieties which may inhibit the intonation and prosody to some extent.

One final thought regarding the status of pronunciation in EFL education is the idea of the power position ultimate language attainment provides. Given any situation where a person is required to speak English, a native speaker or a non-native speaker with excellent L2 skills will have immense power over those who are not as proficient in the language. For example, ponder the idea that one of the participating students of this study applies for a job at an international business where they will be required to speak English to co-workers, managers, and customers. If said student does not feel comfortable in their language, or if the accent is too
off so that it distracts the receiver from the semantic meaning, that person will be at a verbal disadvantage. If instead the said student would have been given pronunciation practice in school that may help even out the differences in power positions. Considering the status of English as a lingua franca, this notion is definitely to consider when designing future education plans in all EFL education.

5.4 Future directions
There is an obvious need for extensive research on pronunciation acquisition in early ages. As Ortega (2009) states, there are many theories of critical periods in language learning, but the only thing they agree on is the fact that there is such a thing as a critical period, but not why it exists. With this in mind, it would be interesting to see further studies on pronunciation in Swedish upper secondary school students who start their EFL earlier than year 3. As of 1994, EFL in Sweden starts in the first grade, but recently more English oriented daycares and kindergartens have emerged.

Another additional study that could put this essay into perspective is the pronunciation attitudes and tendencies among Swedish upper secondary school teachers. As the teachers are the immediate interpreters of SNAE’s education plans and grading criteria, they have a major role in the aspect of pronunciation.

Additionally, a study on how extramural English can be used in school environments could be of interest in order to investigate how students’ personal interests can be used in pedagogical practices and settings.

6. Conclusion
To conclude, this study was conducted in order to investigate the pronunciation tendencies in Swedish upper secondary school students. Previous studies have indicated that Swedish EFL learners are moving towards an Americanized pronunciation as a consequence of the global impact the United States has on international businesses, politics and economics. However, America’s world leading entertainment industry, and the advancement of streaming technology is what allows Swedish students to be emerged by the American variety of the language even in their spare time. As this study shows, the students mainly consume English speaking
entertainment through movies and TV-shows, and they largely favored those where American English was being used.

The results of the recordings also indicate that the students tend to adhere to a more rhotic sounding accent, although their prosody, pitch and intonation may be closer to Swedish at times. However, when analyzing the specified target words that display a clear difference between GA and RP, the results were not as clear anymore. In fact, many students used the RP variety, much more so than initially expected. Thus, when only focusing on, and analyzing the phonetic differences, the students’ actual use of the different varieties has not changed much at all since the studies conducted over 10 years ago. In short, purely phonetically, they mix the two varieties incredibly inconsistently.

However, there may be an explanation offered for that if we consider the students’ L1—Swedish. When comparing the inconsistent instances of pronunciation, one can easily find that in many cases the favored English variety is the one that best mirrors the pronunciation pattern of the L1. This goes in accordance with Flege’s (1999) theory of L1 filtering, in which he claims that the reason we do not reach ultimate L2 attainment is not because we are incapable of learning the L2, but rather because we learned the L1 so well that everything new filters through the L1. Additionally, Ortega (2009) mentions the critical age periods for second language acquisition and we found that in Sweden, current EFL education occurs within that critical period, but the students in this study followed an older EFL agreement. In short, that means that their EFL education started after the critical age period. Thus, Flege’s theory on filtering receives even higher importance regarding L2 pronunciation.

With this in mind, the results of the study can be put into a comparative perspective to the earlier studies on Swedish students’ pronunciation tendencies but it requires us to take a step back from the specific target words and focus on the pronunciation as a more complex system than just phonetics. This means that there are more components to the pronunciation than initially thought that need to be taken into consideration in order to fully understand the results. Thus, when taking the aforementioned factors into consideration, America continues to influence Swedish students’ English pronunciation and that will presumably continue, given the American variety’s dominating status in many global industries.
7. References


Nurfitri, A., (2014) *YouTube as Media for learning English pronunciation in English department students*, English Department of Tangjungpura University


### 7.1 Non-academic references


Shaw, G. B., (1913) *Pygmalion*, Hofburg Theatre, Austria

Appendix A

Survey for Degree Project 2018
Julia Flisberg, Autumn term 2018/2019
15 credits

Note: All participating students are completely anonymous. No names of students, schools, or teachers will be published. All data gathered will be used for a degree project by Julia Flisberg at Stockholm University. The recordings will only be used to transcribe the interview.

Please, read the following out loud:

The man was wearing a suit when he boarded the plane from London to New York. He had brought his dog with him, but it had to go in a special dog crate so he was by himself now. The man almost tripped on a suitcase and ended up stubbing his toe against a seat. He laughed nervously and hoped no one had seen it. He thought he’d better hurry up and find his seat. Either I’ll be seated behind a crying baby or someone with smelly snacks which I can’t stand, he thought. Neither happened and the journey went by better than expected.

The end.

Please, read the following out loud:

Tune
During
Soul
Don
Dawn
Appendix B

What TV-shows/movies do you watch?______________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
How many hours/week?
0-5  5-10  10-15  15+
Do you follow any English speaking YouTubers/podcasts, if yes, which ones?___________
______________________________________________________________________________
Do you listen to English audio books, if yes, what variety of English are they read in (e.g. British,
American, Australian etc.)?________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Where do you think you hear English being spoken the most?
TV  News  Movies  Gaming  YouTube
   Other:______________
What kind of English variety do you think you speak? _________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Do you have any English speaking relatives?
   Yes, they are from____________________  No
Have you spent any time in an English speaking country?
   Yes. Country:___________ for ______months/years  No
What variety of English do you think you are being taught in school?
   American  British  Australian
      Other:____________________
How do you think English pronunciation is best learned?____________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________