

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**BRITISH AND AMERICAN ACCENT FEATURES IN  
THE PRONUNCIATION OF ESTONIAN LEARNERS  
OF ENGLISH**  
BA thesis

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how Estonian learners of English produce five phonetic features associated with Standard Southern British (SSB) and general American (GenAm). The features are rhoticity, t-voicing, and three vowel contrasts (PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM, THOUGHT/PALM). The study also considers how students' self-reported accent preferences align with their actual pronunciation. Fifteen first-year students at the University of Tartu were analysed through recordings of *Arthur the Rat*. Findings show that while students often favour one variety, their speech blends features from both. Rhoticity was the most consistently realised feature, while vowel contrasts showed the most variation.

Keywords: pronunciation, phonetics, British English, American English

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## List of abbreviations

AmE – American English

BrE – British English

GenAm – General American

RP – Received Pronunciation

L1 – first language

L2 – second language

SSB – Standard Southern British

## Introduction

English is spoken with a wide variety of accents across the world. An accent refers to a distinctive way of pronouncing a language, often tied to a speaker's geographical, social, or cultural background (Levis & Zhou 2018: 1). While accents are typically associated with specific regions or communities, they can also be highly personal and variable across individual speakers (Levis et al. 2018: 1). The perception of what constitutes an 'accent' is often subjective – features that sound marked to one listener may go unnoticed by another, depending on their own linguistic background or familiarity with the variety in question.

Phonetic features are the core building blocks that distinguish one accent from another. These include vowel and consonant sounds, rhythm, stress patterns, and intonation (Mesthrie & Bhatt. 2008: 114). English has a large inventory of vowel and consonant phonemes, which are realised differently across accents. Standard accents like Standard Southern British and General American are often used as example models but they differ in multiple ways, for instance, in vowel quality and rhoticity (Levis 2018b: 112).

Accents are more than just patterns of sound; they influence how speakers are perceived and can affect one's social identity, confidence, and communicative success (Saito et al. 2017: 615). Learners may strive for native-like pronunciation to gain social acceptance or enhance career opportunities, while others may retain features of their L1 accent as a marker of identity (Derwing & Munro 2015: 431). These decisions are shaped by external factors, including exposure, motivation, and the perceived prestige of certain varieties.

This study focuses on Standard Southern British (SSB) and General American (GenAm) – two widely used reference accents in pronunciation instruction. While both represent regional varieties, they are frequently presented as 'standard' models in teaching materials (Collins & Mees 2013: 6). In Estonia, British English has traditionally dominated classroom instruction and textbooks, especially in formal education (Saluveer 2004: 59).

However, American English is increasingly prevalent in everyday media consumption, such as films, TV shows, and social media (Meng et al. 2024). This dual exposure can influence learners' speech patterns and make the boundaries between the two varieties less distinct (Derwing & Munro 2012: 380).

The aim of this study is to explore how consistently learners of English produce phonetic features associated with the two chosen standard varieties, SSB and GenAm, and how their self-perception aligns with their actual speech output. This is achieved by analysing five phonetic features – rhoticity, t-voicing, and three vowel contrasts (PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM, THOUGHT/PALM) – in the text *Arthur the Rat*. The thesis begins with a literature review on accent variation in English, followed by an empirical analysis of learner performance in relation to their intended accent.

## 1. Accent Variation in English: Observing Phonetic Features

The focus of this section is on accent variation within English, with particular attention to features commonly associated with Standard Southern British (SSB) and general American (GenAm). First, the two accent varieties are introduced, along with the rationale for choosing them and an overview of the phonetic features that differentiate them. Next, these features – t-voicing, rhoticity, and three vowel contrasts (PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM and THOUGHT/PALM) – are examined in more depth, providing the phonetic basis for the practical analysis. This section also explores how learner's self-perceived accent choice may influence English pronunciation as a foreign language, drawing on relevant studies to situate the research in its linguistic context.

### 1.1 Varieties of English Pronunciation: SSB and GenAm

The language spoken in Southern Britain has undergone significant changes over the past few centuries. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, members of the upper social classes across the

country began adapting their speech to match that of the elite in the London area (Lindsey 2019: 1). This emerging prestige accent was later coined Received Pronunciation (RP) by phonetician Alexander Ellis in 1869 and became ‘standard speech’ of Britain’s upper classes (Lindsey 2019: 1).

RP is one of the most widely studied and socially marked accents of British English (Wells 1982: 117). The term ‘received’, meaning ‘accepted’, reflected its growing status, which was further cemented by widespread use in radio and television broadcasts (Cruttenden 2014: 77).

Since Daniel Jones’s (1917) label of *Public School Pronunciation*, the accent has evolved significantly. By the 1980s, Wells (1982: 279) distinguished between *mainstream RP* (the central norm), *U-RP* (upper-crust RP), and *adoptive RP* (used by adults who acquired RP later in life). Today, however, RP is seen as an accent of the past (Lindsey 2019: vii). As Wells writes in the foreword to Lindsey’s *English After RP* (2019: v), ‘the existing descriptions of standard British English pronunciation, known as RP, are outdated.’ In its place, the term *Standard Southern British* (SSB) has emerged as the more accurate and modern reference variety (Lindsey 2019: 4). This paper adopts SSB as the model accent for British English.

General American English, commonly referred to as General American (GenAm), is a broad accent group in American English characterised by the absence of marked regional features and serves as the informal standard in media and education (Van Riper 2014: 123). GenAm is the American variety most commonly introduced to learners of English as a foreign language (Wells 1982: 118). It is ‘the type of American English which may be heard, with slight variation, from Ohio through the Middle West and on to the Pacific Coast’ (Prator & Robinett 1972).

Much like SSB, GenAm is often referred to as ‘Network English’ due to its widespread use in broadcasting services (Cruttenden 2014: 84). The accent is often perceived by Americans as neutral, lacking any regional, ethnic, or socioeconomic characteristics, although Americans from the Midlands, Western New England, and Western regions are the most widespread users of the accent (Kretzschmar 2004: 257). The term ‘General American’ came into use and was first disseminated by the American English scholar George Philip Krapp in 1925 (Van Riper 2014: 124). This paper adopts GenAm as the model accent for American English.

RP and GenAm, and by extension the modern counterpart of RP, Standard Southern British, have long been recognised as the primary reference accents for British and American English respectively (Weisser 2005). Their lack of regional features and widespread recognition make them especially useful for observational linguistic analysis (Wells 1982: 122). Furthermore, both accents have traditionally played a central role in English language teaching and media representation, which enhances their familiarity both among native and non-native speakers (British Library 2007). These factors make SSB and GenAm ideal for a comparative study of English pronunciation.

## 1.2 Phonetic features distinguishing SSB and GenAm

There are numerous phonetic features that distinguish Standard Southern British (SSB) from General American (GenAm). Among the most prominent are differences in the vowel system, rhoticity, yod dropping, t-voicing, and glottalization. This section provides an overview of all these features, with particular focus on five that were selected for detailed analysis in this study: rhoticity, t-voicing, and the vowel contrasts PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM, and THOUGHT/PALM. These were chosen based on the perceptibility in speech without the

need for specialised equipment. All phonemic transcriptions of example words were taken from the Cambridge Dictionary and from Collins & Mees book (2013).

Yod-dropping refers to the omission of the /j/ sound after alveolar consonants in GenAm. In GenAm, this glide /j/ is frequently omitted in such environments. For example, the words *tune*, *studio* and *nude* are commonly pronounced in GenAm as /tu:n/, /'studioʊ/, and /nud/, respectively (Collins & Mees 2013: 96). This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern in American English to simplify or reduce complex consonant clusters. Yod-dropping is not universal in all contexts, but it is especially systematic after alveolar sounds such as /t/ and /d/, and thus serves as a clear indicator of accent distinction between SSB and GenAm.

Another noticeable phonetic feature that differentiates SSB from GenAm is pre-glottalization, a process by which a glottal stop [ʔ] is inserted before voiceless plosives /p, t, k/ when they occur at the end of a syllable, provided they are preceded by a vowel, nasal, or liquid consonant (Lindsey 2019: 67). For example, the word *button* may be pronounced in SSB as /'bʌʔtn/, where the /t/ is replaced or reinforced by a glottal stop, creating a momentary closure before the nasal /n/. In GenAm, these words typically retain the plosive without glottalization: /'bʌtn/ (Carley & Mees 2020: 18-19). Pre-glottalization is a well-established phonological process in SSB and its absence in GenAm provides another point of contrast that helps differentiate between the two reference accents.

While the aforementioned features are relevant when analysing SSB and GenAm, this study focuses on five other phonetic features – rhoticity, t-voicing, PALM/TRAP vowel contrast, LOT/PALM vowel contrast, and THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast – that are (1) audibly distinguishable in speech without specialized equipment, and (2) strongly contrastive between SSB and GenAm. The other features were considered, but ultimately excluded due

the greater difficulty in reliably detecting yod dropping and pre-glottalization through auditory analysis alone without acoustic tools.

Rhoticity is a feature that is common to GenAm but not used in SSB. It is one of the most prominent ways to classify accents in English (Lass 1999: 114). In rhotic accents, like GenAm, the sound of the rhotic consonant /r/ is preserved in all phonetic environments. In non-rhotic accents, like SSB, speakers no longer pronounce /r/ in postvocalic environments (Lass 1999: 114). For example, a rhotic accent would pronounce /r/ in the word *car* (/kɑ:r/), but in a non-rhotic accent, the postvocalic /r/ is omitted (/kɑ:/). There are instances where postvocalic /r/ is pronounced in non-rhotic accents. When /r/ is word-final and followed by a word-initial vowel, then even non-rhotic accents pronounce /r/. An example would be *better apple* (/ˈbetər ˈæpəl/). This is called a linking /r/ (Cruttenden 2014: 224).

T-voicing, or ‘tapping’, is one of the more striking characteristics of General American (Wells 1982: 248). The process of tapping affects the intervocalic /t/ in words such as *atom* (/ˈætəm/) or *better* (/ˈbetər/). In GenAm, the syllable-final prevocalic /t/ is often realised as a tapped [ɾ] instead of a [t] (Wells 1982: 248). The tapping of /t/ is often perceived as replacing /t/ with /d/, like in the word *butter* (/ˈbʌɾər/) (Fox 2011: 158). In SSB, the syllable-final prevocalic /t/ is never tapped and retains its voiceless plosive pronunciation. So, in SSB, the word *atom* would be pronounced as /ˈætəm/ and the word *better* would be pronounced as /ˈbetər/. This is a feature that more often than not can be easily distinguished between the two accents by listeners (Wells 1982: 248), and therefore has been chosen as one of the analysable features.

The PALM/TRAP vowel contrast involves the distinction between the long open back-central unrounded vowel /ɑ:/ (PALM) and the open front unrounded vowel /æ/ (TRAP). This contrast is particularly characteristic of SSB, where the two vowels are clearly differentiated. For instance, the word *calf* is pronounced with the PALM vowel in SSB as /kɑ:f/, while in

GenAm, it is typically realised with the TRAP vowel, /kæf/. In many cases, GenAm assimilates the PALM and TRAP lexical cases, which leads to minimal pairs or originally distinct words becoming homophones. A common example is *ant* and *aunt*, which are both pronounced /ænt/ in GenAm, whereas in SSB, *ant* is /ænt/ and *aunt* is /ɑ:nt/, preserving the contrast.

The LOT/PALM vowel contrast represents another notable distinction between SSB and GenAm, involving the comparison between the LOT vowel /ɒ/ and the PALM vowel /ɑ:/. In SSB, these vowels remain phonetically distinct. However, in GenAm, vowel mergers have led to the two lexical sets being pronounced identically (Labov et al. 2005: 171). As a result, the originally rounded and short LOT vowel has shifted to an unrounded, lengthened vowel that closely resembles the PALM vowel /ɑ:/, effectively eliminating the contrast between the two. This can be observed in the pronunciation of the word *rotten*, which in SSB is /'rɒtən/, while in GenAm it is pronounced /'rɑ:tən/.

The THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast involves the THOUGHT vowel /ɔ:/ and the PALM vowel /ɑ:/. In SSB, these vowels remain distinct: for instance, the word *law* /lɔ:/ uses the THOUGHT vowel and the word *spa* /spa:/ uses the PALM vowel; the words are similar but the vowels remain distinct. In GenAm, however, the words are /lɑ:/ and /spa:/; the vowel sounds have both been assimilated into PALM. The THOUGHT vowel often merges with /ɑ:/, leading to potential overlap in other words like *caught* and *cot*, both pronounced /kɑ:t/ in GenAm (Labov et al. 2005: 173).

### 1.3 A Learner's Self-Perception and Pronunciation Awareness

Language learners often form internal models of how they believe they sound when speaking a second language (Venkatagiri & Levis 2007: 263). This self-perception, particularly in relation to pronunciation, plays a key role in their learning process. Closely

related to this is phonological awareness, which refers to a learner's ability to consciously perceive and reflect on the sounds of language (Venkatagiri & Levis 2007: 264). In the context of L2 pronunciation, it involves being able to detect whether a sound is produced accurately and how it differs from the target model. Importantly, there may be a gap between a learner's intended accent (i.e., the variety they aim to produce) and their actual phonetic output (Moyer 2014: 419). This awareness can influence learning outcomes, speaking confidence, and social identity. A learner who perceives their pronunciation as accurate may have high confidence, even if their output differs considerably from the target variety. Conversely, learners with a strong awareness of their own deviations may experience self-consciousness, potentially affecting their willingness to speak (Saito & Saito 2017: 604).

However, learners are not always reliable judges of their own speech. There are several reasons why this disconnection between self-perception and actual production may occur. Some learners may struggle with auditory discrimination, meaning that they have difficulty perceiving very hard to detect phonetic differences, especially those that do not exist in their first language (Flege 1995: 237). There is also inconsistent input – for example, exposure to both British and American English models – that can lead to a blurred internal target and uncertainty about what is 'correct' (Derwing & Munro 2012: 380). Also, learners may have an incomplete acquisition of phonological categories, where they have not yet formed stable mental representations of all L2 phonemes (Best & Tyler 2007: 20). This can lead to variation and inconsistency in production, often without the learner's conscious awareness.

In the present study, students were asked to self-identify the English accent they believed they spoke with. This self-assessment was then observed with the analysis of their actual production of the selected five phonetic features (rhoticity, t-voicing, and PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM, and THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast) that differentiate SSB and GenAm. This

approach allows for an investigation into the alignment between students' own perceptions and their phonetic output. The topic is particularly relevant in the case of the participants who declared to have a 'mixed' use of English, as they may indicate uncertainty, unconscious blending of accents, or the influence of variable input from media and educational settings.

## 2. Learners' realisation of SSB and GenAm pronunciation

The aim of the practical analysis of this thesis was to examine how consistently learners of English realise phonetic features characteristic of either Standard Southern British (SSB) or General American (GenAm). The focus is on five key features: rhoticity, t-voicing, PALM/TRAP vowel contrast, LOT/PALM vowel contrast and THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast. These features were selected for their prominence in distinguishing SSB from GenAm. The study investigates whether the participating first-year students consistently adhere with the pronunciation conventions of their chosen accent and explores the extent of variation present.

### 2.1 Participants and materials

The data used in this analysis were collected from first-year students enrolled in lecturer Reeli Torn-Leesik's course *Inglise keele praktiline foneetika (Practical English Phonetics)* at the University of Tartu. First-year students were chosen because they have had limited exposure to formal pronunciation teaching at a university level. The group of first-year students were divided into three groups based on their self-reported variety of English: those who identified British English as their preferred variety, those who preferred American English, and those who reported using a mixture of both. From each group, five students were randomly selected for analysis, resulting in a total sample size of 15 participants. All

of the participating first-year students gave their written approval to use their recordings for scientific purposes.

As part of the students' coursework, a background survey was conducted by the course lecturer, in which the students answered questions about their mother tongue, how long they had studied English, what other languages they speak, what variety of English they claimed to use, and if they had been taught phonetics before. The students were also able to evaluate their own pronunciation skills, what part of pronunciation is most difficult to them and how important good pronunciation is to them.

All participants reported to having studied English for more than 9 years. The native language of all participants is Estonian, although one individual also speaks Russian fluently. Only four students indicated that they had never received any formal instruction in English pronunciation. The remaining participants had studied something about pronunciation either in primary or secondary education, or through other means. The average self-assessed pronunciation skill rating among students was 3.5 out of 5. The most commonly reported challenges in English pronunciation included stuttering during speech and difficulties with pronouncing unfamiliar words. For the majority of respondents, conveying their intended message was considered more important than achieving precise pronunciation.

The first-year students were instructed to record themselves reading a passage from the story *Arthur the Rat* (Appendix 1), which had been assigned as part of their coursework. All of the first-year students enrolled in the course used recording tools and environments for recording of their own choosing to complete the task and submitted them to Moodle as part of their coursework. The recordings were then later made available to the author of the thesis for analysis purposes. Each file was labelled and coded using the letter 'S' to indicate 'student', followed by the order in which the recording was analysed within the students' variety group, and the student's self-reported English variety. The letter 'B' refers to British

English, ‘A’ to American English, and ‘M’ to the mixed English (e.g., S1B where ‘S’ denotes ‘student’, ‘1’ indicates that the recording was the first analysed in the British English group, and ‘B’ stands for British English). For clarity, during the analysis, the variety groups will be referred to as follows: students who self-reported using British English will be called the ‘British group’, those who self-reported using American English the ‘American group’, and those who self-reported using a mixed variety will be termed the ‘mixed group’.

## 2.2 Procedure

Before analysing the students’ recordings, the words containing the chosen phonetic features in the *Arthur the Rat* text were highlighted and colour-coded for clarity. The chosen phonetic features are rhoticity, t-voicing, and the vowel contrasts between PALM and TRAP, LOT and PALM, and THOUGHT and PALM. Prior to analysing the participants’ recordings, reference versions of *Arthur the Rat* in both British English and American English were carefully reviewed to familiarise the author with the expected realisations of the target phonetic features.

After marking the texts, a separate analysis sheet was created in Excel, where the students’ realisations of the phonetic features were marked down. A binary coding system (0–1) was employed to record the presence of specific features. SSB was used as the reference variety: any realisation that aligned with SSB conventions was coded as 1, while those that reflected GenAm pronunciation norms were coded as 0. The binary system was selected for its simplicity and consistency.

The analysis was conducted auditorily, without the use of specialized acoustic software. Instead, the author relied on high-quality headphones and attentive listening to determine the realisation of each target feature. Recordings were listened to multiple times

as needed to ensure accuracy. Each feature was assessed individually to maintain analytical focus and consistency. In cases where a student's pronunciation remained unclear, the corresponding native speaker recordings were revisited to support accurate judgement of the feature realisation. After all 15 recordings had been analysed, the results for each participant were compiled into a comprehensive, feature-specific Excel table. This table allowed for the observation of general patterns and tendencies across participants, as well as feature realisations at the level of individual words.

### 2.3 Results of student pronunciation realisations

The findings of the analysis are presented in feature-specific subsections. Each subsection begins with an overview of how the particular feature was analysed within the *Arthur the Rat* text. This is followed by a general summary of the overall results, which is then complemented by detailed findings at both the individual and variety group levels.

#### 2.3.1 Rhoticity

The analysis identified a total of 19 words which are rhotic in AmE. Only occurrences where /r/ was followed by a consonant or a pause were analysed. Instances of linking /r/ or intrusive /r/ were excluded to maintain simplicity. Only one word, *Arthur*, exhibited rhoticity in the word-medial position; all other instances were word-final. In total, 345 instances of possible rhoticity were analysed across all students, occurring in the words *there, whenever, answer, either, learn, ever, care, more, heard, where, rafters, hair, horror, search, later, horse, garden*. The words *never* and *Arthur* appeared twice. One instance of *horror* was excluded because student S2M did not say the word in their recording.

Figure 1 shows the number of participating students on the vertical axis and on the horizontal axis the words that were analysed in their speech. Only 98 out of the possible 344 instances, or 35%, were non-rhotic realizations of /r/.

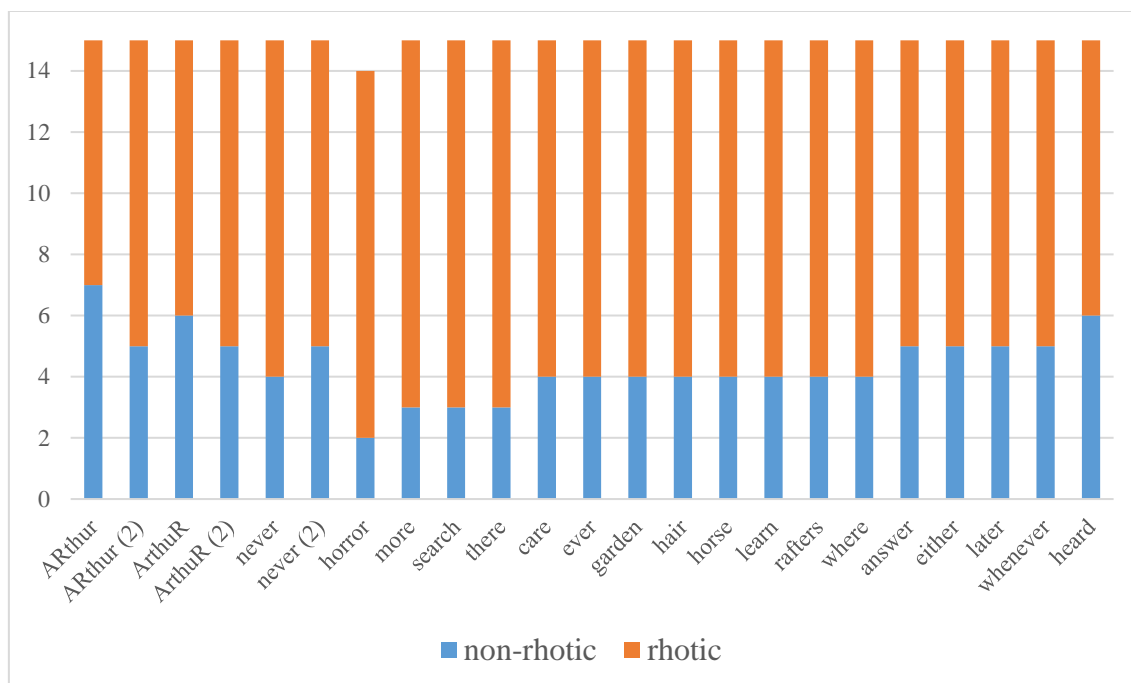


Figure 1 Student realisations of rhoticity

The highest amount of non-rhoticity occurred in the first, word-medial occurrence of *Arthur*. The word-final /r/ in *horror* was not realised by only two students. Interestingly, both *Arthur* and *never* appeared twice in the text, and the two instances of each were realised differently by many students, often showing variation even within the same speaker's pronunciation.

Figure 2 shows the number of words with expected rhoticity in GenAm on the vertical axis, and the British group student codes on the horizontal axis. Two students in the British group – S3B and S4B – rarely adhered to SSB pronunciation conventions regarding rhoticity. S3B only omitted /r/ in both instances of word-medial *Arthur*, *heard*, and *rafters*. S4B only omitted /r/ in the first word-medial *Arthur*. In contrast, S1B, S2B, and S5B demonstrated greater consistency with SSB rhoticity. Both S1B and S2B did not pronounce /r/ in any of the analysed words, while S5B pronounced /r/ only in *horror*.

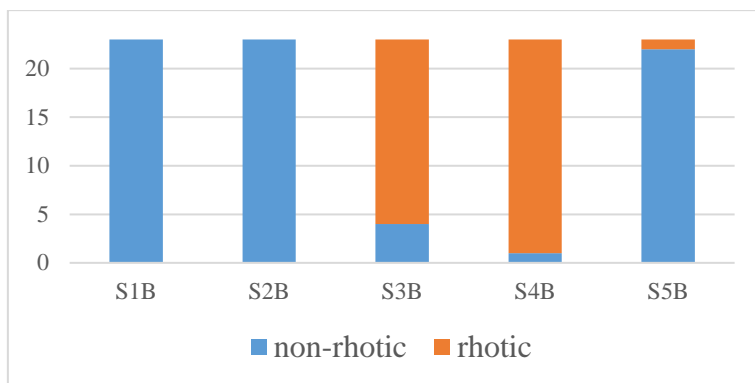


Figure 2 Rhoticity among the British group

Figure 3 has the number of words with expected rhoticity in GenAm on the vertical axis, and the American group student codes on the horizontal axis. The American group was successful in adhering to General American pronunciation conventions about rhoticity. The only exception was S2A, who did not pronounce the first word-medial /r/ in *Arthur*. The other students – S1A, S3A, S4A, and S5A – pronounced all remaining instances of /r/ in the analysed words.

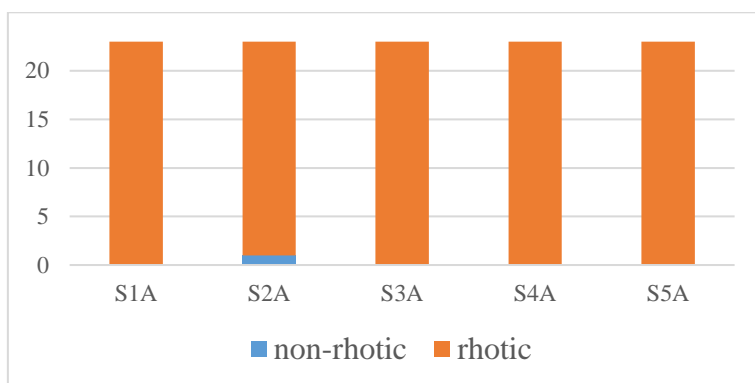


Figure 3 Rhoticity among the American group

Figure 4 shows the number of words with expected rhoticity in GenAm on the vertical axis, and the mixed group student codes on the horizontal axis. The mixed group generally tended to follow General American pronunciation conventions regarding rhoticity. However, students S1M and S5M exhibited more non-rhoticity in their recordings. S1M pronounced /r/ in the words *there*, *learn*, *more*, *rafters*, *horror*, *search*, and *garden*. In contrast, S5M omitted /r/ in both instances of *Arthur*, as well as in *whenever*, *answer*, *either*,

the second instance of *never*, *learn*, *heard*, and *later*. Students S2M and S4M were consistent with General American rhoticity. S3M only omitted /r/ in *garden*.

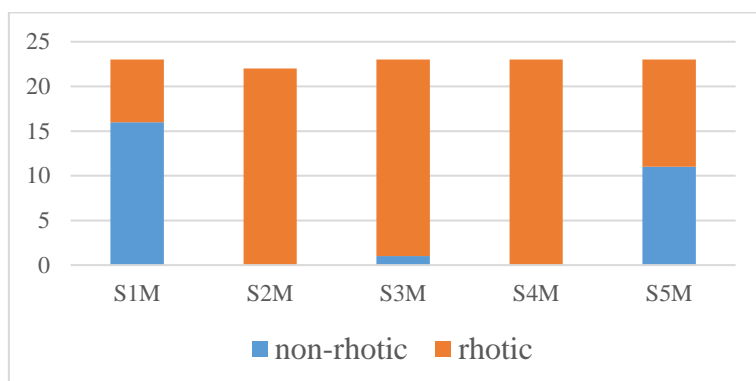


Figure 4 Rhoticity among the mixed group

### 2.3.2 T-voicing

There were two words, *later* and *wanted*, in the text where t-voicing could potentially occur<sup>1</sup>. Both of these instances were word-medial, there were no instances of t-voicing across word boundaries. The analysis included 30 instances of possible t-voicing across all students in the words *later* and *wanted*.

Figure 5 shows the number of participating students on the vertical axis and on the horizontal axis the words that were analysed in their speech. 19 out of 30 instances, or 63.3%, did not have flapping of the word-medial /t/.

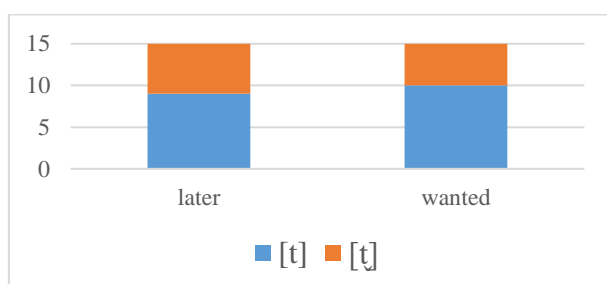


Figure 5 Student realisations of t-voicing

<sup>1</sup> The word *rotten* was initially included as well as a special test case. In *rotten*, t-voicing does not typically occur because the /t/ is followed by a syllabic /n/, and a glottal stop [ʔ] is generally used instead of a flap [ɾ]. *Rotten* was deliberately included to assess whether participants would mistakenly apply flapping in this context. However, since none of the students produced a flap in *rotten*, this word was ultimately omitted from the final analysis.

Although the sample size for this feature is limited and does not allow for definitive conclusions, the results still offer insight into how students approach phonetic environments where t-voicing may occur.

On an individual level, student-based consistency in the use of t-voicing was notably high. Participants tended to apply the feature uniformly across both words, pronouncing them either with or without a flap in a consistent manner. This likely reflects an internalised pronunciation pattern or rule that each student follows when producing this feature.

The group-based results were largely consistent across groups. In the British group, most students adhered closely to SSB pronunciation conventions, with only one student (S3B) exhibiting t-voicing in the word *later*. The other students showed no instances of t-voicing. Similarly, the American group closely followed General American conventions; only student S3A did not produce t-voicing in the word *wanted*, while others exhibited t-voicing in all applicable instances. The mixed group predominantly aligned with SSB conventions and generally did not use t-voicing. However, student S5M showed one instance of t-voicing in the word *wanted*.

### 2.3.3 PALM/TRAP vowel contrast

There were seven words in which the PALM/TRAP vowel contrast could be observed. Those words were *asked*, *answer*, *aunt*, *grass*, *rafters*, *last*, and *calf*. These are all of the words in the text where a PALM/TRAP vowel distinction exists between SSB and GenAm. SSB uses /ɑ:/, the PALM vowel for these words and GenAm uses /æ/, the TRAP vowel for these words. Overall, the analysis encompassed 105 instances of the PALM/TRAP vowel contrast across all participants. One instance of *last* was excluded. Student S1B did not realise the word *last* with either the PALM or TRAP vowel, the word sounded more like *least*, which uses FLEECE vowel.

Figure 6 has the number of the participating students on the vertical axis and the analysed words with PALM/TRAP vowel contrast on the horizontal axis. 53 out of the 104 instances, or 51%, were realised with the PALM vowel.

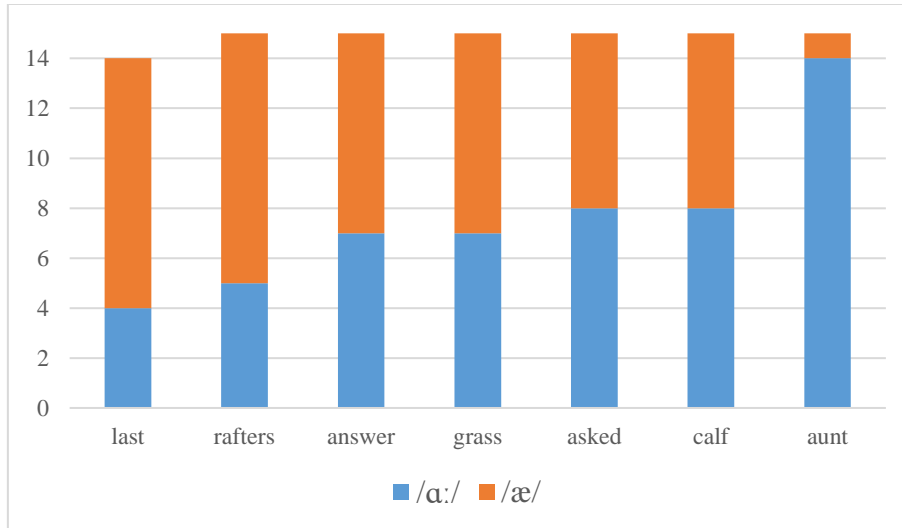


Figure 6 PALM/TRAP vowel pronunciation among students

The word *aunt* stood out as a clear outlier, with the majority of students predominantly using the PALM vowel for pronunciation. In contrast, *last* was the most frequently pronounced with the TRAP vowel.

Figure 7 has the number of words where the PALM/TRAP contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the British group students on the horizontal axis. The British group mostly followed SSB pronunciation conventions. Two students, S3B and S4B, used the TRAP vowel in the words *answer*, *grass*, *rafters*, and *last*. For S3B, it was *answer* and *last*. For S4B, it was *grass*, *rafters* and *last*. The other three all used the PALM vowel and did not fluctuate with their vowel use.

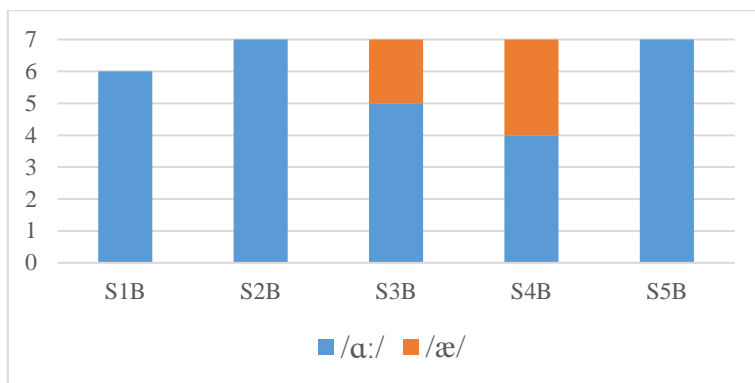


Figure 7 TRAP/PALM vowel contrast among the British group

Figure 8 shows the number of words where the PALM/TRAP contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the American group students on the horizontal axis. The only word that was realised with the PALM vowel by the American group was *aunt*. This was done by students S1A, S3A, S4A and S5A. S2A was the only one to pronounce *aunt* with the TRAP vowel. This may reflect prior exposure to SSB-based instruction in school, or deliberate choice to avoid confusion with the word *ant*, which shares the same pronunciation as *aunt* in General American. All other words in this category were pronounced using the TRAP vowel.

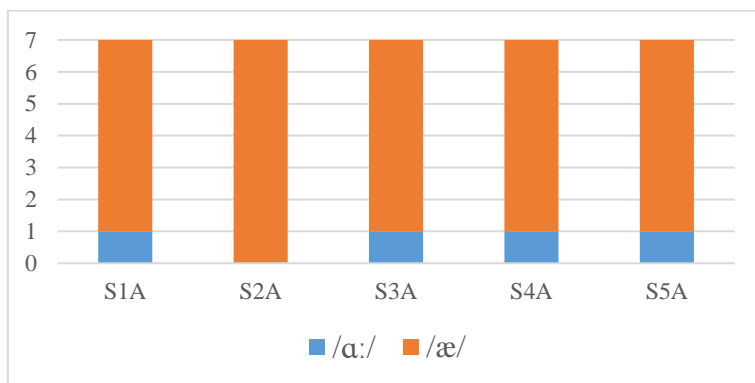


Figure 8 PALM/TRAP vowel contrast among the American group

Figure 9 has the number of words where the PALM/TRAP contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the mixed group students on the horizontal axis. The figure shows that the pronunciation patterns among the mixed group were quite varied. Student S1M consistently used the PALM vowel for all the tested words. S2M generally

preferred the TRAP vowel but pronounced *aunt* with the PALM vowel. Similarly, students S3M, S4M and S5M also used PALM vowel for *aunt*, meaning that all the students in the mixed group realised *aunt* with the PALM vowel. S3M additionally used the PALM vowel for *answer*, *grass*, and *calf*, while using the TRAP vowel for *asked*, *rafters*, and *last*. S4M used the PALM vowel for *aunt*, *asked*, and *calf*, and the TRAP vowel for the remaining words. S5M pronounced *rafters* and *calf* with the TRAP vowel, while using the PALM vowel for the rest.

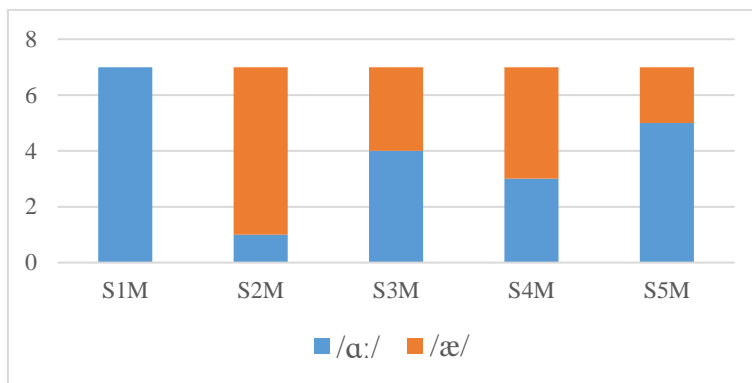


Figure 9 PALM/TRAP vowel contrast among the mixed group

#### 2.3.4 LOT/PALM vowel contrast

LOT/PALM vowel contrast was found in five words. Those words were *loft*, *rotten*, *wanted*, *what*, and *on* two times. These are all of the words in the text where a LOT/PALM vowel distinction exists between SSB and GenAm. SSB uses /ɒ/, the LOT vowel for these words and GenAm uses /ɑ:/, the PALM vowel for these words. Overall, the analysis encompassed 90 instances of the LOT/PALM vowel contrast across all participants.

Figure 10 has the number of the participating students on the vertical axis and the analysed words with LOT/PALM vowel contrast on the horizontal axis. 51 out of the 90 instances, or 56.6%, where the LOT/PALM contrast could be observed, were realised using the LOT vowel.

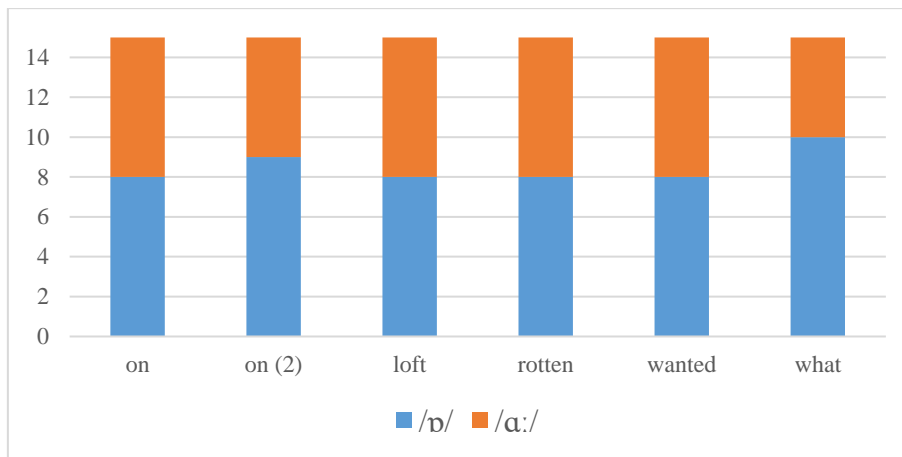


Figure 10 LOT/PALM vowel pronunciation among students

The word *what* had the highest number of LOT vowel pronunciations, with 10 students using the LOT vowel. This was followed by the second occurrence of *on*, with fewer instances observed in the remaining words.

Figure 11 has the number of words where the LOT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the British group students on the horizontal axis. The British group generally followed SSB pronunciation conventions, as can be seen in figure 11, with only four instances where words were realised using the PALM vowel; all other occurrences were pronounced with the LOT vowel. Students S1B, S2B, and S5B consistently used the LOT vowel for all the tested words. Both S3B and S4B pronounced *loft* with the PALM vowel, and S4B additionally used the PALM vowel for the first instance of *on* and for *what*. All remaining realisations in this group followed the LOT vowel pattern.

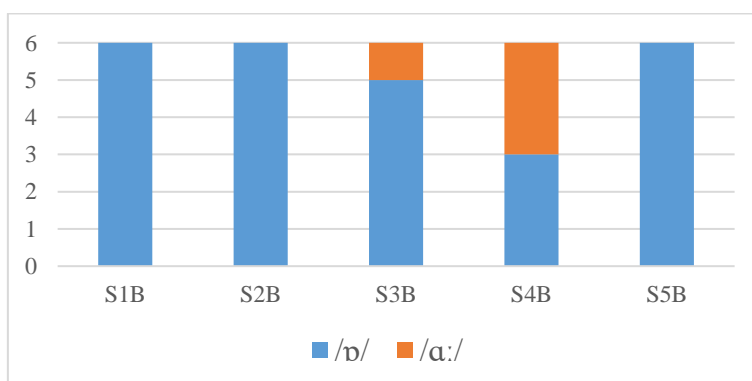


Figure 11 LOT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the British group

Figure 12 has the number of words where the LOT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the American group students on the horizontal axis. As shown in figure 12, the American group generally followed General American pronunciation conventions, though with slightly more inconsistencies than in the British group. Student S1A pronounced *loft* and the second instance of *on* with the LOT vowel, while using the PALM vowel for all the other words. S2A consistently used the PALM vowel across all the tested words. S3A predominantly used the LOT vowel, with *wanted* being the only word realised with the PALM vowel. S4A used the LOT vowel only for *what*, pronouncing all the other words with the PALM vowel. Similarly, S5A used the LOT vowel for *what* and *wanted*, and the PALM vowel for the remaining words.

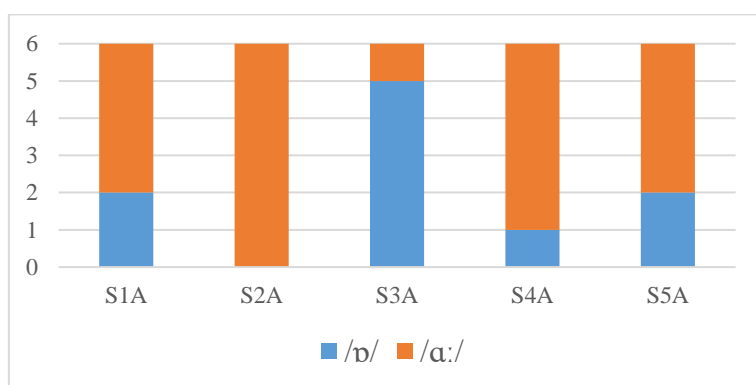


Figure 12 LOT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the American group

Figure 13 has the number of words where the LOT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the mixed group students on the horizontal axis. As seen in figure 13, the mixed group showed a high degree of variation, with each student realising the words quite differently from one another. Student S1M used the LOT vowel for both instances of *on*, *loft*, and *what*, while pronouncing *rotten* and *wanted* with the PALM vowel. S2M used the LOT vowel only on *wanted*, using the PALM vowel for all other words. S3M consistently used the LOT vowel across all instances. S4M pronounced the second *on* and *wanted* with the PALM vowel and the remaining with the LOT vowel. In contrast, S5M used the PALM vowel for all instances.

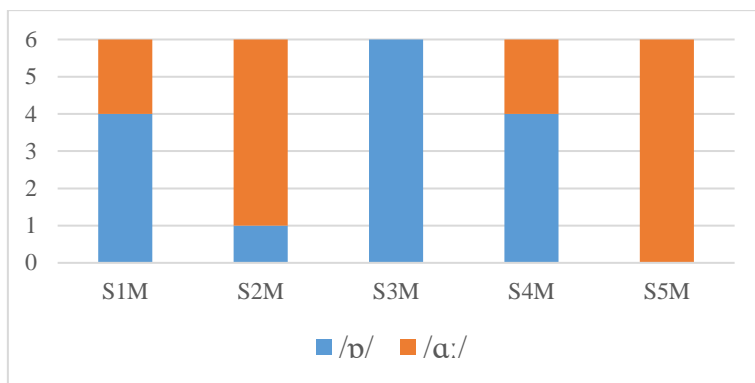


Figure 13 LOT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the mixed group

### 2.3.5 THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast

THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast was found in three words. Those words were *fallen*, *walls*, and *all* two times. These are all of the words in the text where a THOUGHT/PALM vowel distinction exists between SSB and GenAm. SSB uses /ɔ:/, the THOUGHT vowel for these words and GenAm uses /ɑ:/, the PALM vowel for these words. Overall, the analysis encompassed 60 instances of the THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast across all participants.

Figure 14 has the number of the participating students on the vertical axis and the analysed words with THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast on the horizontal axis. 22 out of 60 instances, representing 36.6%, were pronounced with the THOUGHT vowel.

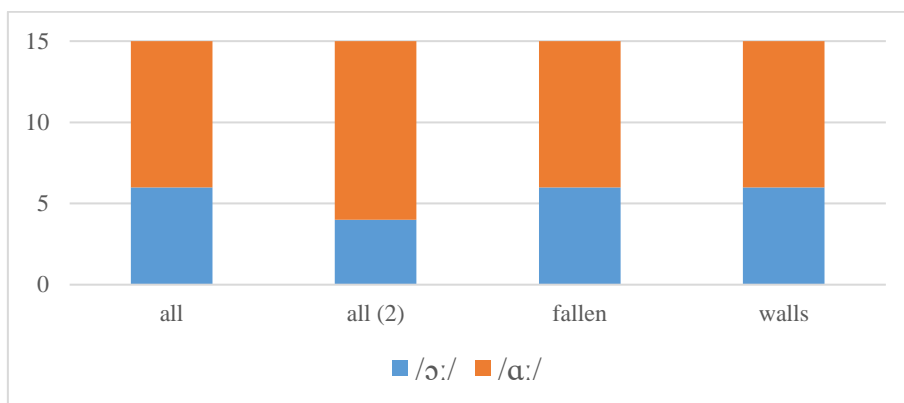


Figure 14 THOUGHT/PALM vowel pronunciation among students

The second instance of *all* had the fewest realisations with the THOUGHT vowel. While the other words were generally pronounced similarly overall, notable differences emerged at the group level.

Figure 15 has the number of words where the THOUGHT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the British group students on the horizontal axis. The British group predominantly favoured the use of the THOUGHT vowel, consistent with typical SSB pronunciation conventions. Students S1B, S2B, and S3B realised all instances using the THOUGHT vowel. In contrast, S4B used only the PALM vowel for all instances. Student S5B realised *fallen*, *walls*, and the first instance of *all* with the THOUGHT vowel but used the PALM vowel for the second instance of *all*.

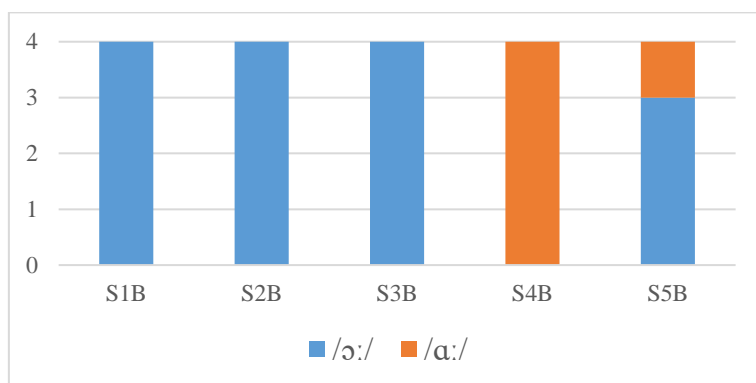


Figure 15 THOUGHT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the British group

Figure 16 has the number of words where the THOUGHT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the American group students on the horizontal axis. The American group showed a high degree of uniformity in their pronunciation. Students S1A, S2A, S3A, and S4A consistently realised all the words using only the PALM vowel, in line with General American pronunciation conventions. The only exception was student S5A, who pronounced *walls* with the THOUGHT vowel, while using the PALM vowel for all other words.

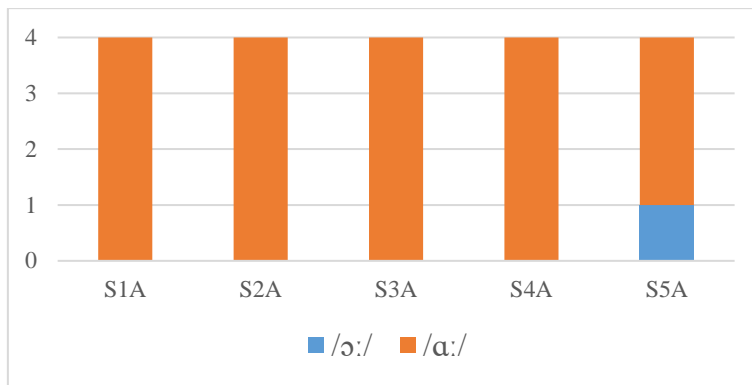


Figure 16 THOUGHT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the American group

Figure 17 has the number of words where the THOUGHT/PALM contrast could be observed on the vertical axis and the codenames of the mixed group students on the horizontal axis. The mixed group also showed preference for the PALM vowel, as shown in figure 17. Students S1M, S2M, and S5M consistently used the PALM vowel in all of their word realisations. In contrast, S3M exclusively used the THOUGHT vowel. S4M was the only student to show variation, pronouncing *fallen* and the first instance of *all* with the THOUGHT vowel, and *walls* and the second *all* with the PALM vowel. Despite the variation across the group, individual consistency was high – each student largely adhered to a single vowel choice throughout.

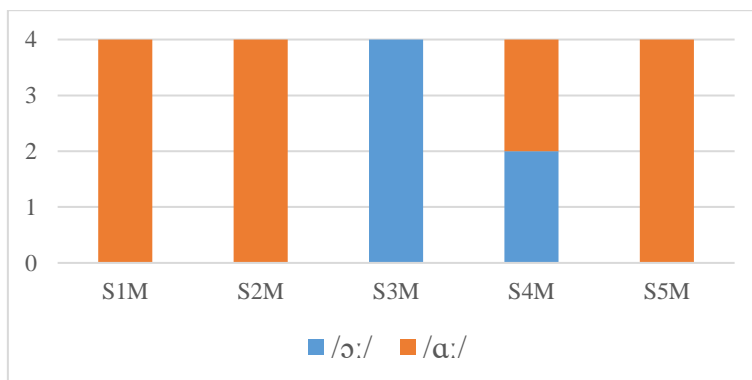


Figure 17 THOUGHT/PALM vowel pronunciation among the mixed group

## 2.4 Discussion of the findings

The results of the analysis reveal notable patterns in how Estonian learners of English realise certain phonetic features associated with Standard Southern British and General American pronunciation. Rather than adhering strictly to one variety, many students demonstrated variability, sometimes mixing features from both reference accents.

Rhoticity was the most consistently realised feature among participants. This aligns with the literature describing rhoticity as one of the most noticeable features distinguishing SSB and GenAm (Cruttenden 2014: 226). Most learners conformed to the pronunciation conventions of the accent they self-reported, particularly those identifying with the American group, who generally preserved post-vocalic /r/ sounds in line with GenAm expectations. In contrast, learners from the British group displayed strong alignment with SBB's non-rhotic convention, omitting /r/ sounds in most post-vocalic contexts. The mixed group favoured GenAm conventions of preserving the post-vocalic /r/.

Interestingly, even within the same pronunciation, variation sometimes occurred. Most notably in the words that appeared twice, such as *Arthur* and *never*. The word-medial /r/ in *Arthur* was often omitted even by students in the American group, possibly due to the flow of the sentence or a simple pronunciation error. Overall, rhoticity appears to be one of the most well understood and stable features for learners, with clear group trends and relatively high within-speaker consistency.

In contrast to rhoticity, t-voicing showed more variation both across and within groups. Although the sample size for this feature was small, a clear pattern emerged: students tended to either consistently use the tap [ɾ] in both words or avoid it entirely. This could suggest that learners adopt internalised rules or patterns that guide their speech (Venkatagiri & Levis 2007: 263)

The British group adhered most closely to SSB norms, largely avoiding t-voicing. The American group was similarly consistent in their use of tapping, with only one deviation. The mixed group leaned slightly toward non-tapping patterns but with one instance of t-voicing present.

The PALM/TRAP vowel contrast revealed the most variation across participants and groups. Although all the analysed words are pronounced with the PALM vowel in SSB, many students substituted PALM with the TRAP vowel, especially in words such as *last*, *grass*, and *answer*. This could be because the British group students had not fully acquired the phonological category (Best & Tyler 2007: 20). Notably, the word *aunt* was realised with the PALM vowel even by most of the American group. Which suggests either prior exposure to British norms or an intentional effort to distinguish *aunt* from *ant* in speech.

While the British group largely adhered to SSB pronunciation conventions, the American group, as expected, preferred the TRAP vowel. The mixed group exhibited a wide range of variation, but each individual showed relative consistency in their own pronunciation patterns, often applying the same vowel quality across multiple words.

LOT/PALM vowel contrast also showed considerable variation, especially within the American and mixed groups. The word *what* was most frequently realised with the LOT vowel, followed by the second instance of *on*. Some students used the PALM vowel even in words where the LOT vowel is expected in SSB, suggesting influence from GenAm input or difficulty in differentiating between the two vowel qualities.

The British group demonstrated the most consistency using the LOT vowel. Meanwhile, the American group had more inconsistency, with only one student adhering strictly to GenAm patterns. The mixed group again showed highly varied realisations, but within-speaker consistency was relatively high, indicating that students were following their own internal patterns rather than switching randomly.

The THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast was the smallest vowel set in the analysis but offered clear insight. The word *all* was the least likely to be pronounced with the THOUGHT vowel. The British group strongly favoured THOUGHT pronunciations, as expected in SSB, while the American group overwhelmingly used the PALM vowel. The mixed group displayed polarisation: some used THOUGHT vowels exclusively, others PALM, with most showing consistent choices within their own speech.

Across all features, a few themes emerged: within-speaker consistency was often higher than between-speaker consistency. This suggests that even when learners differ from their chosen variety, they tend to continue pronouncing same words similarly to each other. Rhoticity stood out as the most clearly defined and consistently applied feature, particularly among students identifying with the American or British group. Vowel contrasts were more variably produced, likely due to subtler phonetic distinctions and less consistent input.

The inconsistencies in realisation may also be attributed to the mixed input students receive from both educational and media sources. While English education in Estonia typically follows British English norms, the majority of contemporary media consumed by learners is American. This contrast likely contributes to a blending of features from both varieties, blurring the distinction between them and influencing learners' language acquisition.

The results highlight that students are not strictly adhering to one reference model but are instead producing a blend of features influenced by exposure, instruction, and perceptual salience. While most students express a preference for one variety, their actual realisations often contain elements of both accents. This has implications for pronunciation instruction, where developing awareness of one's own patterns may be just as important as aligning with a specific native standard.

## Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to explore how consistently Estonian learners of English produce phonetic features associated with the two chosen standard varieties, SSB and GenAm, and how their self-perception aligns with their actual speech output. This was done through analysing five phonetic features – rhoticity, t-voicing, and PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM, THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrasts – in students’ reading of the text *Arthur the Rat*.

Standard Southern British has emerged as a more modern and accurate variety to describe the neutral accent spoken in Southern Britain (Lindsey 2019: 4). The previous version was famously known as Received Pronunciation, which was often seen as the accent of the upper classes (Lindsey 2019: 1). General American is the North American equivalent to SSB. It is commonly used in media and broadcasting for it too lacks any regional markers (Van Riper 2014: 123). This neutrality and lack of regional markers serves well to use the two accents as comparison points when analysing the use of English among speakers.

The two accents have many differences that distinguish each other from each other, like rhoticity, yod dropping, and different vowel contrasts. Rhoticity is one of the more noticeable features between the two accents. In rhotic accents, like GenAm, the sound of the rhotic consonant /r/ is preserved in all phonetic environments. In non-rhotic accents, like SSB, speakers no longer pronounce /r/ in postvocalic environments (Lass 1999: 114). Another noticeable feature is t-voicing. In GenAm, the syllable-final prevocalic /t/ is often realised as a tapped [ɾ] instead of a [t] (Wells 1982: 248). In SSB, the syllable-final prevocalic /t/ is never tapped and retains its voiceless plosive pronunciation. The PALM/TRAP vowel contrast involves the distinction between the PALM vowel /ɑ:/ and the TRAP vowel /æ/. This distinction is clear in SSB but is often hard to differentiate in GenAm words. The LOT/PALM vowel contrast involves the comparison between the LOT vowel /ɒ/ and the PALM

vowel /ɑ:/. The THOUGHT/PALM vowel contrast involves the THOUGHT vowel /ɔ:/ and the PALM vowel /ɑ:/. (Carley & Mees 2013: 101).

Language learners often develop internal models of how they believe they sound in a second language, but this self-perception does not always align with their actual output. Phonological awareness plays a key role in shaping this perception (Venkatagiri & Levis 2007: 263-264). However, factors such as limited auditory discrimination, inconsistent input from both British and American English, and incomplete acquisition of phonological categories can contribute to inconsistencies in production.

The conducted study was based on data from 15 first-year students at the University of Tartu. Participants were divided into three groups: British, American, and mixed, according to their self-reported preferred English variety. All students read a passage from *Arthur the Rat*, and their recordings were analysed for five aforementioned phonetic features that differentiate SSB and GenAm. The analysis was conducted auditorily, with reference recordings used for support. A binary coding system was applied to track feature realisations, allowing for comparison across individuals and groups.

The findings revealed that learners did not consistently align with one reference accent but rather showed a blend of features from both SSB and GenAm. Rhoticity was the most consistently realised feature, with students mostly adhering to their self-reported English variety. T-voicing showed individual consistency but group-level variation, especially in the mixed group of students. Vowel contrasts displayed the most variation, with many students mixing vowel qualities across words. However, individual pronunciation patterns tended to be more consistent.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – *Arthur the Rat* text

#### ARTHUR THE RAT

There was once a young rat named Arthur who would never take the trouble to make up his mind. Whenever his friends asked him if he would like to go out with them, he would only answer, "I don't know." He wouldn't say "Yes", and he wouldn't say "No" either. He could never learn to make a choice. His aunt Helen said to him, "No-one will ever care for you if you carry on like this. You have no more mind than a blade of grass." Arthur looked wise but said nothing. One rainy day the rats heard a great noise in the loft where they lived. The pine rafters were all rotten, and at last one of the joists had given way and fallen to the ground. The walls shook and the rats' hair stood on end with fear and horror. "This won't do," said the old rat who was chief. "I'll send out scouts to search for a new home." Three hours later the seven scouts came back and said, "We've found a stone house which is just what we wanted. There's room and good food for us all. There's a kindly horse named Nelly, a cow, a calf and a garden with an elm tree."

## Resümees

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Karl Mattias Laiuste**

**British and American Accent Features in the Pronunciation of Estonian Learners of English** (Briti ja ameerika hääldusjoonte foneetilised tunnused eesti emakeelena õppijate kõnes)

Bakalaureusetöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 36

### Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö uurib, kuidas eesti emakeelega inglise keele õppijad hääldavad viit foneetilist tunnus, mis eristavad kahte standardset inglise keele hääldusvarianti: Standard Southern British (SSB) ja General American (GenAm). Lisaks analüüsitakse, kuivõrd õppijate enda hinnang oma hääldusele kattub nende tegelikule hääldusele.

Uuritavad foneetilised tunnused on: rootilisus (rhoticity), t-helilisus (t-voicing) ning kolm täishäälikute kontrasti – PALM/TRAP, LOT/PALM ja THOUGHT/PALM. Need tunnused valiti välja, kuna neid on võimalik kuuldeliselt tuvastada ilma spetsiaalsete kõnetarkvara abita. Andmed koguti viieteistkümnelt Tartu Ülikooli esimese kursuse üliõpilaselt, kes lugesid lindistamisel ette teksti *Arthur the Rat*. Õppijad jaotati kolme rühma nende endi poolt määratletud hääldusvariandi alusel: briti, ameerika või sega stiiliga inglise keel.

Tulemused näitavad, et kuigi paljud õppijad eelistavad kindlat hääldusviisi, esineb nende kõnes sageli mõlema variandi jooni. Kõige järjekindlamalt järgiti rootilisust, kus õpilased enamasti järgisid oma valitud variandi norme. T-helilisuse puhul esines rohkem rühmasiseseid erinevusi, kuid individuaalne järjekindlus oli üldiselt kõrge. Kõige suuremat varieeruvust sai täheldada täishäälikute kontrastide puhul, kuid ka siin säilis iga õppija isiklik hääldusmuster.

Märksõnad: inglise keel, foneetika, Ameerika inglise keel, Briti inglise keel

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