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## INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT AND FOREIGN ACCENT RATINGS

Even though it may have not been done in the same methodological design, recent research demonstrated that academic self-concept and foreign accent have an undeniable element in common – effect on learner's self-confidence. Learners with a more positive academic self-concept are more likely to engage in challenging activities and be more willing to communicate in a target language, while learners with a heavy foreign accent are more likely to develop speaking anxiety and reduce self-efficacy in interaction. Therefore, the present study aims at investigating the potential relationship between Serbian English major students' academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings. A total of thirty female second-year students of the English Department at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac, completed a questionnaire on self-concept and the recordings of their spontaneous speech were rated by five native and five non-native speakers of English, who were laymen in a linguistic sense. The results were then compared using a correlation coefficient, only to find a statistically significant positive correlation between academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings. The latter pointed to the overall conclusion that a more positive academic self-concept is correlated to higher foreign accent rating scores, which in turn may underline the fact that students with a more positive self-concept could be the ones developing a more native-like production through frequent and effective interaction unrestricted by lack of self-confidence. The research contributes to the investigation of extralinguistic factors shaping the development of foreign accents and underscores once again that the nature of target language production is all but simple and static. Pedagogical implications related to the importance of enhancing Serbian EFL students' self-concept draw attention to the potential re-evaluation of the current teaching practices.

Keywords: academic self-concept, foreign accent, EFL, native speaker, non-native speaker

### 1. Introduction

Recent research has shown a renewed interest in pronunciation instruction practices (NGUYEN & NEWTON 2020), despite the general predominance of communicative approaches to foreign language teaching. Even though ardent advocates of the idea that developing communicative competence did not opt for traditional pronunciation activities, there seems to have been a silent consensus among both teachers and students that having native-like pronunciation represents an ideal goal in EFL settings. It goes without saying, however, that the mutual comprehension of the teaching process between

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instructors and learners leads to more positive learning outcomes (HA & NGUYEN 2021). Simultaneously, the proponents of restoring the rightful position of pronunciation in an EFL lesson realized the importance of altering the existing pronunciation teaching practices dominated by drills and repetitions, as well as isolated sound practice deprived of authentic interaction, by re-evaluating the importance and potential of considering psychological factors in pronunciation teaching (MURPHY & BAKER 2015). The latter was probably a direct consequence of the fact that pronunciation instruction had always been closer to phonetics than applied linguistics (MUNRO 2016).

Bearing in mind that foreign accents may occasionally hinder understanding and even lead to communication breakdowns (ROGERS et al. 2004), pronunciation may be considered as an important indicator of English proficiency (GAS & SELINKER 2001). Moreover, positive pronunciation evaluation may affect learners' motivation which can in turn result in better academic performance (CHUMING 2004). Taking the aforementioned into consideration, as well as the fact that learner self-perceptions may play a crucial role in shaping the teaching and learning process (MERCER & WILLIAMS 2014), the present study aims at investigating the relationship between Serbian English major students' academic self-concept and the ratings of their accent while speaking L2 English. Moreover, the study also involves describing the current level of students' academic self-concept and how their speech is rated in terms of foreign accentedness.

## 2. Academic Self-Concept and L2 Learner Motivation

Numerous studies have underscored the indispensable role of academic self-concept in foreign language learning. The present study relies on Hardy's definition of academic self-concept, according to which it represents a construct predicting and explaining someone's behaviour, with self-perceptions influencing one's actions and vice versa (HARDY 2013). When learning activities are aligned with the learners' actual abilities, learners' self-esteem and motivation improve resulting in improved academic performance. This, in turn, creates a more favourable self-concept (MARSZALEK et al. 2022). Self-concept includes the interplay of personal, academic, and social dimensions, and as multifaceted as it can be, it affects learners' self-confidence boost and willingness to communicate in a target language (RUBIO 2014). Furthermore, encouraging students to self-assess their own capabilities enhances self-awareness and develops more reliable learning strategies related to reflecting on weaknesses and strengths of learning (OCHOA 2007). When well-developed, self-concept increases motivation and brings about the desired learning outcomes (CSIZÉR & MAGID 2014). Similarly, a more positive self-identity may result in careful investment in the learning process, enhancing language proficiency overall (NORTON 2011).

When it comes to the potential factors affecting academic self-concept, in a study examining the bidirectional relationship between self-concept and self-efficacy, it was found that self-efficacy and self-concept mutually influence each other, yet that self-efficacy has greater impact on language achievement (CHAI 2025). For instance, self-concept and self-efficacy contribute to language learning achievements in both English and Chinese (CHAO et al. 2019). In a study including more than 2,500 participants, the authors reached a conclusion that both self-concept and self-imagination positively affected English language learning outcomes, while self-efficacy served as a mediator enhancing the

effects of the previously mentioned concepts (CHEN et al. 2022). In a study looking into the Iranian EFL learners' perceived classroom climate, academic self-concept, learning self-regulation, and academic identity status on a sample of 420 university students, classroom climate was found to positively correlate with academic self-concept (MOHAMMADI 2020). There is a dynamic relationship between teacher motivation and learners' self-concept, with motivated teachers' efforts positively influencing language learning success (KIMURA 2014). Specific motivational strategies, e.g. goal setting or promoting self-regulation, are generally recognized as factors predicting learners' self-related beliefs (MEZEI 2014). In a study on the interplay between self-concept and learning anxiety, it was found that negative self-beliefs can hinder language acquisition and increase anxiety levels (KING 2014). Gender can play an appreciable role in shaping self-concept, with female learners usually displaying a stronger Ideal L2 self, which in turn causes higher motivation (YOU et al. 2016). Students with disabilities possess weaker academic self-concepts than learners without disabilities (ŽIC RALIĆ & MATIČEVIĆ 2023). For instance, dyslexic learners have unique self-concept profiles influencing their motivation and learning strategies (CSIZÉR et al. 2010).

### 3. Perception of Foreign Accent and its Importance for the Research in EFL

In-depth studies on different languages discovered that the dominant causes of foreign accent can be sought in the age of onset, length of residence in an L2-speaking country, formal instruction and motivation, gender, amount of L1 use and individual aptitude (PISKE et al. 2001). Earlier exposure to a target language is associated with a less pronounced foreign accent (FLEGE et al 1999). On the other hand, foreign accent can have a notable impact on social interactions, credibility assessment, as well as cognitive processing. Listeners often associate certain accents with specific social characteristics, thus foreign accent may have an effect on social judgements and even lead to an evident bias in certain contexts (KANG & YAW 2021). Furthermore, foreign accent is frequently perceived as less trustworthy because it requires more cognitive effort, thus increasing scepticism toward a speaker's message (LORENZONI et al. 2024).

Experiments with various speakers demonstrated that those with heavier accents were judged more negatively than those with milder forms of foreign accent resulting in a conclusion that foreign accent can affect (neuro)cognitive mechanisms (FOUCART & BROUWER 2021). Certain accents are also said to affect a person's appearance to others as less intelligent or even less physically attractive (ANDERSON et al. 2007). The effect of accentedness on social identity can further be supported by research showing that people easily detect faked regional accents, especially where there have been cultural tensions throughout history (CHAKRABORTY 2017). A study combining techniques from experimental economics and linguistics found that accent perception affects individual behaviour, with in-group favouritism manifesting as a feeling of cognitive superiority when interacting with out-group accents (HEBLICH et al. 2015). The aforementioned findings point to the importance of continuing research on foreign accentedness, especially in those EFL contexts where there is a scarcity of research in the field in general. One such context is definitely Serbian, with occasional studies dealing with particular elements of pronunciation that may affect or reveal foreign accentedness (e.g. BJELAKOVIĆ & ČUBROVIĆ 2021; PAUNOVIĆ 2023), with studies dealing with foreign accent through

the lens of perception and speaker ratings being almost non-existent.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Aims and Research Questions

Starting from the assumption that positive pronunciation self-assessment may lead to increased motivation for learning, the aim of the current study is to explore the relationship between Serbian English major students' academic self-concept and the rating of foreign accent in their L2 speech. In order to meet the proposed goals, the investigation was based on the following research questions:

- What is the current level of Serbian English major students' self-perception of academic self-concept?
- How is the spontaneous speech by Serbian English major students rated in terms of foreign accentedness?
- Is there a correlation between Serbian English major students' academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings?

### 4.2. Participants

The chosen sample of participants included thirty second-year English major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac, who were attending the course of *English Phonology* at the time. In order to prevent any challenges in the rating process related to gender differences in pitch, resonance and formant measurements, the participants were all female, with the average age of 20.93. The participants possessed prior knowledge of the English sound system, phonemic transcription, and intonation, since they had all successfully passed the *English Phonetics* exam not more than six months before the investigation took place. Their overall English proficiency was tested via an online diagnostic test<sup>2</sup>, and the results demonstrated a current level of B2 CEFR. The participants could be characterized as the ones with slightly lower levels of proficiency or below average for the current course they were attending. This was done deliberately, in order to focus on foreign accent ratings of lower proficiency students, and by lower we mean lower than the rest of the college group. All the participants signed a written informed consent before the actual testing procedure.

### 4.3. Instruments and Procedure

The research was based on two primary instruments: a questionnaire and a rating scale. In order to investigate the participants' academic self-concept, an Academic Self-Concept Questionnaire (ASCQ) was used, adapted from a previous study (JOYCE & YATES 2007). The adaptations included slight rewording for clarity. It contained twenty 5-point Likert-scale items in total, subdivided into ten items related to academic confidence and ten items related to academic effort. The Likert scale ranged from 1-never to 5-always. Even though the questionnaire was filled out by students familiar to the examiner, this seeming lack of anonymity did not affect reliability and validity of data in any way since the answers were numerically coded and analysed with no reference to the actual names of participants.

<sup>2</sup> Available online at <https://internationalenglishtest.com/english-level-test>.

There are two ways of estimating pronunciation proficiency in an L2 – one of them is exploring the actual production through the experimental methodology of phonetics and phonology, and the other one involves native and non-native speakers' foreign accent judgements (MUNRO 1995). The second instrument was a 7-point foreign accent rating scale prepared based on similar methods and findings from previous studies (SOUTHWOOD & FLEGE 1999). For the purpose of the present study, five native speakers and five non-native speakers of English were employed to perform the task of foreign accent ratings. The group of natives spoke in a General American variety and were linguistically naïve (Chicago (2), New York (2), and Boston (1), 2 male, 3 female, mean age 27.0). The English major students included in the present sample were likewise American English speakers, hence the choice of native speakers. The group of non-native raters included native speakers of Bulgarian (2), Ukrainian (1), Macedonian (1) and Serbian (1), 1 male, 4 female, mean age 31.6. They were likewise laymen in terms of linguistics knowledge and were chosen as speakers of different languages to ensure the objectivity of foreign accent ratings. The raters were supposed to listen to the sample recordings of spontaneous speech made by the participants and were asked to rate the speaker based on the level of native-like production, from 1 – non-native-like to 7 – native-like. The rating samples of recordings were excerpted from longer sections previously self-recorded by Serbian English major students as part of their recording project in the *English Phonology* course. The recordings of spontaneous speech included answers to pre-planned questions, e.g. *What is your dream job?* or *How do you imagine an ideal holiday/vacation?*. The stretches of speech included five sentences approximately, containing about 70-90 words, average length of 47.06s. The recordings were sent online and the raters performed the task in the comfort of their home, with the author of the research providing them with clear instructions on what to do. They were instructed to listen to the recording twice and circle the number on a scale based on their impression of foreign accentedness. At the moment, the goal of the research is not to compare native and non-native speakers' ratings, thus mean scores of ratings were then obtained for each participant and included in further analysis. The entire procedure recording and collecting questionnaires occurred in the winter semesters of 2022/2023 and 2023/2024, while foreign accent rating was done in May 2024.

Data collection and statistical processing were conducted using the SPSS software, version 20. The recordings were checked for background noise and the samples were excerpted using Audacity, version 3.2.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the academic self-concept testing are presented in Table 1. As evident from the table, the statements were quite straightforward and easily understandable. It seems worth mentioning here that statements 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 20 had reverse coding to ensure the consistency and reduce answer bias. The data were assigned inverted values in SPSS, so that it did not affect the interpretation of results. Standard deviation data were provided along with percentage scores.

**Table 1.** *Results of the Academic Self-Concept Questionnaire*

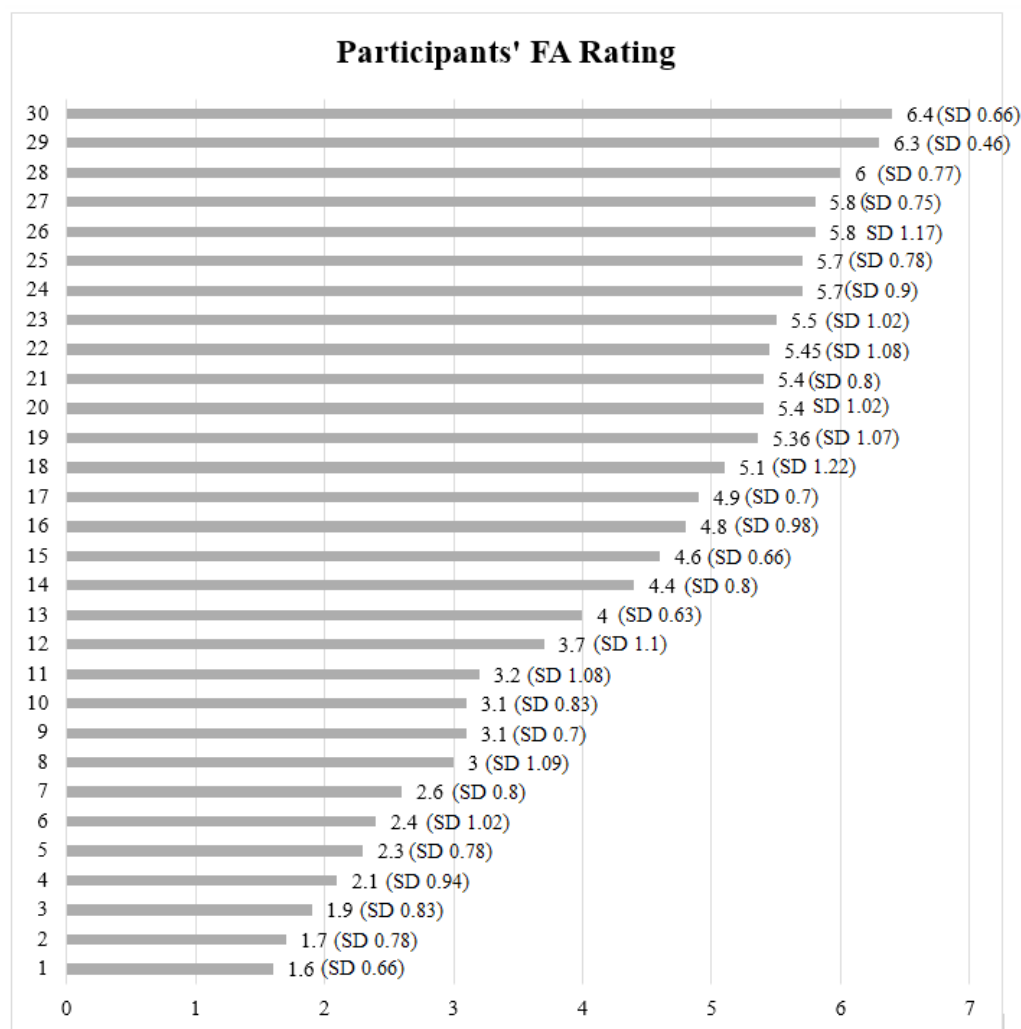
No.	Statement	Answers (%)					St. Dev.
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always	
1.	I can follow the lessons easily.	/	3.3	10.0	43.3	43.3	0.78
2.	I daydream a lot in class.	6.7	16.7	23.3	16.7	36.7	1.32
3.	I am able to help my classmates with their schoolwork.	6.7	23.3	20.0	23.3	26.7	1.30
4.	I often do my homework without thinking.	13.3	40.0	16.7	10.0	20.0	1.36
5.	If I work hard, I think I can succeed in finding a desired job.	10.0	30.0	16.7	23.3	20.0	1.33
6.	I pay attention to the teachers during lessons.	3.3	6.7	30.0	33.3	26.7	1.04
7.	Most of my classmates are smarter than I am.	16.7	43.3	20.0	13.3	6.7	1.14
8.	I study hard for my tests.	16.7	6.7	10.0	43.3	23.3	1.40
9.	My teachers feel that I am poor in my work.	26.7	33.3	16.7	10.0	13.3	1.36
10.	I am interested in my schoolwork.	10.0	26.7	16.7	30.0	16.7	1.29
11.	I often forget what I have learnt.	13.3	26.7	30.0	20.0	10.0	1.35
12.	I am willing to do my best to pass all the subjects.	10.0	16.7	20.0	20.0	33.3	1.38
13.	I get frightened when I am asked a question by the teachers.	10.0	23.3	33.3	16.7	16.7	1.23
14.	I feel like quitting my studies.	26.7	36.7	10.0	13.3	13.3	1.33
15.	I am good in most of my academic subjects.	10.0	23.3	43.3	6.7	16.7	1.19
16.	I am always waiting for the lessons to end.	10.0	40.0	23.3	16.7	10.0	1.16
17.	I do poorly on tests.	23.3	30.0	20.0	13.3	13.3	1.35
18.	I do not give up easily when I am faced with a difficult question in my schoolwork.	6.7	13.3	26.7	20.0	33.3	1.28
19.	I am able to do better than my friends in most subjects.	/	26.7	20.0	13.3	40.0	1.22
20.	I am not willing to put more effort into my schoolwork.	23.3	40.0	16.7	6.7	13.3	1.3

Judging by the results, more than 86% of students stated that they could follow the lessons easily. About 50% said that they daydreamt in class frequently, which may seem like a counteracting statement to the first one. Interestingly, only about 50% said that they were able to help their classmates with their schoolwork. Statement no. 4 may seem alarming since exactly 30% of students said that they did their homework without thinking. This could be an important revelation not only regarding students' interests, but the organization of homework tasks, as well. It could also reveal that students often do homework mechanically without devoting complete attention to it. Moreover, only about 40% believed that they could succeed in finding a desired job provided they worked hard, which could point to the students' overall disappointment with the current socioeconomic situation

in the country. 60% of students pay attention to teachers frequently or always, while there are 10% of students who rarely or never pay attention to teachers in class. About 20% of students felt that their classmates were smarter than them, and about the same percentage thought that their teachers felt they were poor at their work. The latter may indicate low levels of students' self-esteem. However, about 46% percent stated that they were frequently or always interested in schoolwork. To sum up, the first ten sentences were related to the self-confidence component of the academic self-concept. After transforming the variables, the mean scores for all the answers were obtained for each participant and the descriptive statistics results displayed a mean score for the self-confidence component of 3.26 (SD 0.51). This indicates sort of a middle ground score, meaning that students' self-confidence is not at a very high level, overall.

The next ten statements were related to the invested effort students are willing to employ in their academic pursuits. 30% of students stated that they forgot what they had learnt frequently or always. However, more than 50% are willing to do their best to pass exams. As promising as it may seem, the latter may point to the predominance of short-term goals in students' academic efforts. About 33% of students feel frightened when being asked a question by teachers, which is almost the same percentage as students who are rarely or never frightened. About 27% of students feel like quitting studies frequently or always. Even though the reasons behind these decisions may not always stem from the lack of effort, this could be a significant indicator to the teaching practice to reconsider elements of curriculum design and general academic organization. About 23% of students see themselves as good in most academic subjects, while about 26% of them cannot wait for the lessons to end. About 26% always do poorly in tests, yet 43% stated that they did not give up when confronted with a difficult task in schoolwork. Interestingly enough, about 53.3% of students felt that they were able to perform better than friends in most subjects. About 20% stated that they were not willing to invest more effort in their schoolwork which corresponds to the percentage wishing to quit studies. Again, the variables were transformed for this segment of the questionnaire, as well. The mean score for academic effort investment is 2.98 (SD 0.22), which represents a lower score than for the self-confidence part. All in all, the general mean score for the entire questionnaire was 3.15 (SD 0.26), which might lead to a conclusion that Serbian English major students' academic self-concept is neither too positive, nor too negative, yet it certainly indicates the need for improvement.

The second part of the current research involved foreign accent ratings, the results of which are presented in Graph 1. Standard deviation values are given in brackets.



**Graph 1.** *Results of the Foreign Accent Ratings*

As evident from the graph, the highest score was 6.4/7, which points to the estimation of pronunciation as near native-like. There are twelve students with scores higher than 5/7, which means that 40% of students' pronunciation was evaluated as relatively high on the scale by both native and non-native speakers. The lowest score was 1.7/7, which means that the pronunciation was estimated as further away from native-like. These results point to the diversity of foreign accent ratings indicating that foreign accent may vary regardless of the relatively even proficiency level. Furthermore, it underscores the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to approach the research from different perspectives. Finally, the third research question was related to the relationship between academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings. In order to investigate the relationship, and after checking the necessary assumptions related to the normality of distribution, linearity, homogeneity of variance and independence of observations, Pearson correlation was performed in SPSS. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between academic self-concept and accent ratings,  $r_{(30)} = 0.486$ ,  $p = 0.006$ , suggesting that higher self-concept scores could be associated with higher accent ratings. Looking into the relation-



ship between the subscales and foreign accent ratings, correlation analysis showed that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the academic self-confidence subscale and foreign accent ratings ( $r_{(30)}=0.505$ ,  $p=0.004$ ). This means that higher self-confidence scores were related to higher foreign accent ratings, i.e. that students with higher self-confidence have pronunciation closer to native-like than the ones with lower self-confidence. Some of the possible reasons for this may be sought in less confident students' reluctance to participate in various communication activities or interactions in L2, which diminishes their opportunity for pronunciation practice and corrective feedback. No statistically significant correlation was found between the subscale of academic effort investment and foreign accent ratings, even though the  $p$ -value was relatively close to reaching the statistically significant value  $p<0.005$  ( $r_{(30)}=0.339$ ,  $p=0.067$ ).

Judging by the aforementioned results, it may be concluded that academic self-concept can be related to higher foreign accent scores, meaning that students with more positive academic self-concept could perform better when it comes to comparing their pronunciation to native speakers. Relying on the findings that stronger academic self-concept can help to increase self-confidence, students could be more adamant to take risks in engaging in communication with L2 speakers, thus being able to practise and improve their pronunciation. The results pointing to the correlation between stronger academic self-concept and higher foreign accent scores are aligned with findings from previous research underscoring the effect of academic self-concept on higher academic performance (e.g. RUBIO 2014; MARSZALEK et al. 2022).

### Conclusion

The investigation in the present study was designed in such a way as to explore whether there was a correlation between Serbian English major students' academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings performed by both native and non-native speakers of English. The results of the questionnaire on academic self-concept showed that Serbian English major students possess slightly higher levels of self-confidence than academic effort investment, leading to an overall conclusion that their academic self-concept was neither too high, nor too low. More precisely, the mean scores showed a value of about 3.15 (with the median value being similar, i.e. 1.16), which is moving towards the higher level (1-very negative, 5-very positive). This leads to the conclusion that more attention needs to be paid to students' self-concept development, either through formal instruction or extracurricular activities, since this might reflect on their motivation and academic achievement. Foreign accent ratings showed a range of scores, even though all the participants were tested at B2 level CEFR. The highest score was 6.4/7 and the lowest one was 1.6/7. This again indicates that foreign accent development represents a complex and dynamic phenomenon in an interlanguage, being driven by different linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated a statistically significant positive correlation between academic self-concept and foreign accent ratings, bringing to a conclusion that a more positive academic self-concept may contribute to foreign accent reduction, i.e. pronunciation closer to native-like. Having in mind that academic self-concept affects learners' self-confidence, the latter may result in more frequent pronunciation practice during the less inhibited in-class or out-of-class communication in L2, which in turn may

lead to learners' fine-tuning their articulation.

Finally, a few limitations need to be addressed. Namely, future research should include male participants, as well, especially because foreign accent rating scores could turn out to be different. Various factors might affect foreign accent ratings, such as gender or age of learning (FLEGE et al. 1995). A greater number of foreign accent evaluators might provide more reliable results. Additionally, a restructured academic self-concept scale should be introduced, focusing on items relevant and specific to the target sample of participants (e.g. making sure that includes components related to pronunciation, grammar or communication skills).

Nevertheless, the study underlined important pedagogical implications. Knowing that negative feedback on students' foreign accent could affect their self-concept, or vice versa, teachers might resort to more constructive feedback focusing on pronunciation strengths. Moreover, being aware that stronger academic self-concept negatively correlates with the strength of foreign accent, students might be more confident to engage in communication in an L2 while teachers are supposed to enable a supportive environment for that. Formal academic instruction should pay more attention to developing a stronger sense of self-confidence and motivation, while also concentrating on improving students' willingness to invest more effort in completing academic obligations. Moreover, pronunciation instruction should incorporate activities bearing in mind that numerous factors contribute to foreign accent, simultaneously emphasizing individual differences. Future research should focus on comparing foreign accent ratings by native and non-native speakers, as well as include other aspects of motivation in relation to the level of foreign accent in learners' speech.

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## ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ ОДНОСА ИЗМЕЂУ АКАДЕМСКОГ САМОПОИМАЊА И ПРОЦЕНЕ НИВОА СТРАНОГ НАГЛАСКА

### Резиме

Иако нису нужно испитивани кроз исти методолошки оквир, савремена истраживања су показала да академско самопоимање (такође се налази и под термином селф-концепт) и страни нагласак имају једну непобитну заједничку карактеристику – утицај на самопоуздање ученика. Ученици позитивнијег академског самопоимања пре ће се укључити у захтевније активности и спремнији су за комуникацију на циљном језику, док ученици са израженим страним нагласком чешће развијају анксиозност и осећају да су мање ефикасни у интеракцији. Стога је циљ овог истраживања испитати могућу повезаност академског самопоимања и процене нивоа страног нагласка код студената англистике у Србији. Укупно тридесет студенткиња друге године англистике на Филолошко-уметничком факултету, Универзитета у Крагујевцу, попунило је упитник о академском самопоимању, док је пет изворних и пет неизворних говорника енглеског језика наивних у лингвистичком смислу оцењивало снимке њиховог спонтаног говора. Резултати су затим подвргнути статистичком тесту корелације, при чему је утврђена статистички значајна позитивна корелација између академског самопоимања и резултата процене страног нагласка. Такви налази указују на општи закључак да позитивнији академски селф-концепт води ка вишим оценама страног нагласка, што може додатно нагласити чињеницу да студенти са позитивнијим самопоимањем могу постићи продукцију ближу изговору изворних говорника. Истраживање доприноси проучавању екстралингвистичких фактора који обликују развој страног нагласка и још једном наглашава да природа продукције циљног језика није нити једноставан нити статичан процес. Педагошке импликације упућују на потенцијално преиспитивање постојећих наставних пракси, посебно оних везаних за подучавање изговора.

*Кључне речи:* академско самопоимање, страни нагласак, енглески као страни језик, изворни говорник, неизворни говорник