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RESEARCH

The elephant in the phonics room: rethinking pronunciation norms in early reading instruction

Hyejeong Ahn[1] · **Catherine Sangster**[2]

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Abstract
Phonics instruction has been re-emphasised in contemporary literacy policy as the foundation of early reading, reinforced through major reports and curriculum reforms. Grounded in the alphabetic principle, phonics teaches grapheme-phoneme correspondences to support decoding. Yet despite its prominence, limited attention has been paid to assumptions about spoken English that shape how phonics is taught and assessed. Many phonics practices, particularly synthetic phonics and oral phonics screening checks, rely on a single, standardised pronunciation model, overlooking the pluricentric and evolving nature of English. In classrooms where learners and teachers speak diverse varieties of English, such assumptions may risk narrowing what counts as accurate decoding. The paper outlines the historical development of phonics and the debates that shaped its implementation, before proceeding to draw on the Oxford English Dictionary's coverage of world Englishes to show that English phonemes are realised in multiple systematic ways. Due to systematic variation in spoken language across accents and linguistic backgrounds, oral decoding responses may be evaluated not only in relation to grapheme-phoneme knowledge but also according to how closely they align with assessors' expectations of a socially familiar pronunciation norm. In such contexts, judgements about decoding accuracy may therefore be shaped not only by phonological knowledge underlying decoding but also by social expectations about which pronunciations are recognised as legitimate forms of English. The paper argues for a linguistically responsive approach to phonics instruction and assessment that recognises phonetic variation across Englishes and avoids the risk of treating accent-related pronunciation variation as evidence of decoding difficulty. It concludes by identifying implications for multilingual learners, speakers of diverse English varieties, and teachers, along with key gaps in research on teacher knowledge and judgement in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Keywords Phonics instruction · Englishes · Pronunciation variation · Multilingual learners · Oral decoding assessment · Linguistic diversity · Accent bias · Early reading policy

Dr Catherine Sangster, Executive Editor at Oxford Languages at Oxford University Press contributed the section on the pronunciation variation in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

1 Introduction

The resurgence of phonics instruction in early literacy education is closely tied to the long-standing "reading wars" (Nicholson, 1992; Pearson, 2004), which reflect tensions between code-based approaches (e.g., phonics) (Adams, 2004; Chall, 1967, 1989) and meaning-oriented pedagogies such as whole language (Goodman, 1970, 1986). While phonics was long considered the dominant method for early reading instruction, emphasising explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondences, it came under scrutiny in the mid-20th century when the whole language approach reframed reading as a natural, holistic process (Goodman, 1986). The whole language approach to teaching reading was subsequently (mis)interpreted as akin to oral language acquisition (Hempenstall, 1997). Within this interpretation, the emphasis on authentic texts was taken to imply that immersion in meaningful reading experiences would enable children to infer phonics patterns, thereby downplaying explicit phonics instruction in favour of learner-centred, experience-based pedagogy.

However, as concerns grew regarding the effectiveness of the whole language approach, particularly for students experiencing reading difficulties, support for explicit and systematic teaching of phonics re-emerged from the late 20th century onward. Key studies and national reviews, including *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (Chall, 1967), the Cooperative Research Program reports (Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Dykstra, 1968), and *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985), consistently affirmed that systematic and explicit phonics instruction improves word recognition, spelling, and comprehension. These findings laid the foundation for a policy-driven resurgence, further reinforced by the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which originally defined reading comprehension as the product of "decoding" and "linguistic comprehension". In later work, these terms were further refined with descriptions of "word recognition" and "language comprehension" (Hoover, 2024; Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). This model underpins much of the contemporary "science of reading" movement (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Seidenberg, 2013), influencing national literacy frameworks across Anglophone countries. Major reports such as the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000), the *Rowe Report* (Rowe, 2005), and the *Rose Report* (Rose, 2006) positioned explicit and systematic phonics as central to early reading instruction. In the case of the Rose Report, this emphasis referred specifically to synthetic phonics (SP). These developments together re-established phonics as a cornerstone of evidence-based practice in literacy education.

Amid the institutionalisation of SP in policy and assessment frameworks, particularly through national initiatives such as the UK Phonics Screening Check (Standards and Testing Agency, 2025b) and Australia's Year 1 Phonics Check (Department of Education, 2023), limited attention has been paid to the assumptions surrounding pronunciation norms in phonics instruction and assessment. Phonics instruction is grounded in the alphabetic principle, the idea that letters and letter combinations represent spoken sounds in English. However, when phonics knowledge is assessed through oral production of decoded words or phonemes in isolation and without contextual cues, decoding accuracy (or lack thereof) is often inferred from how a student pronounces a decoded word aloud.

This creates the possibility that accent-based phonetic variation may be interpreted as evidence of inaccurate decoding. This possibility may be amplified in SP contexts, where grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) are frequently taught and assessed in isolation, leaving little scope for recognising legitimate phonetic variation in oral responses.

SP practices that present GPCs as having a single "correct" pronunciation can implicitly position one pronunciation as the expected form, which is often aligned with what is perceived as "Standard English" and modelled on a national prestige accent. In practice, such norms are rarely defined explicitly in policy documents and are instead often interpreted through reference to socially recognised prestige varieties such as Standard Australian English, Received Pronunciation in England, or General American in the U.S., even though these varieties themselves encompass considerable phonetic variation and do not prescribe a single uniform realisation of sounds. In classroom assessment contexts, judgements may therefore be shaped by assessors' own pronunciation norms or by their familiarity with accents that are socially recognised as representing Standard English. This assumption reflects broader ideologies of Standard English (Milroy, 2001), which position particular pronunciations as normative and "correct" despite the well-documented phonological diversity of English varieties.

While being pedagogically indispensable, teacher modelling may also implicitly position one phonetic realisation of a phoneme as the only correct pronunciation norm. In such contexts, students' decoding may be evaluated according to teachers' understandings of what constitutes the expected or "correct" pronunciation, which can obscure the rule-governed phonological variation common in linguistically diverse classrooms. It also risks conflating decoding ability with accent conformity. This can blur the distinction between decoding knowledge and accent realisation, particularly for multilingual learners whose phonological repertoires draw on multiple sound systems. A similar oversight appears in research on multilingual learners, where systematic reviews of science of reading-aligned approaches note that little attention has been given to how phonological and linguistic differences influence oral language and phonics development (Odo, 2021). This gap is especially significant in cases where learners' repertoires include sound systems that diverge from the single-phoneme standard assumed in policy and assessment while shaping how they perceive, produce, and map phonemes to graphemes.

English phonemes are not universally realised, and even within a single national context, pronunciation can vary significantly. For instance, in Australia, the vowel 'a' in *dance* may be pronounced as /æ/ (as in *cat*) by some speakers and as /ɑː/ (as in *father*) by others, depending on region and social background (Cox & Palethorpe, 2007; Horvath, 2004). These kinds of variation, both within and across English-speaking contexts, are often systematic and rule-governed (Jenkins, 2000). Notably, the degree of phonetic variation does not always align with how that variation is treated in assessment. For example, the presence or absence of rhoticity is perceived differently across varieties of English. The pronunciation of the post-vocalic /r/ in *car*, as we hear in most varieties of American English, is absent from non-rhotic forms used in British, Australian, or New Zealand English where post-vocalic /r/ is typically not pronounced. Yet this difference is rarely viewed as problematic. In contrast, variations such as reduced vowel length contrast between words like *sh**i**p* and *sh**ee**p* in Singapore English (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.c.) or monophthongisation in Philippine English, for example, realising the diphthong /eɪ/ (as in *f**a**c**e***) as a monophthong [eː] (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.a.), may be treated as decoding errors.

These inconsistencies raise important questions about how pronunciation is taught and evaluated. Although phonetic difference can be measured using articulatory or acoustic analysis (Blackwood Ximenes et al., 2017; Noiray et al., 2014), classroom assessments rarely draw on such criteria. Instead, correctness is typically judged through auditory perception

and social expectations about what sounds 'right.' Research on accent bias shows that listeners frequently interpret speech diverging from "standard" varieties as deficient (Dovchin & Dryden, 2022) and that oral reading assessments can misidentify systematic features of "non-standard" varieties such as Black English as decoding errors simply because they do not match a preferred accent (Elzy-Palmer, 2025). As spoken language varies systematically across accents and linguistic backgrounds, oral decoding responses may therefore be evaluated not only in relation to grapheme-phoneme (GP) knowledge but also according to how closely they align with assessors' expectations of a socially familiar pronunciation norm. In such contexts, judgements about decoding accuracy may be shaped not only by phonological knowledge but also by social expectations about which pronunciations are recognised as legitimate forms of English.

In the current SP context, determinations of decoding "error" may therefore reflect broader social judgements about which varieties and speakers are considered legitimate (Hickey, 2012; Lippi-Green, 1997; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Without recognising these biases, phonics instruction and assessment risk reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that privilege dominant accents while marginalising other equally systematic and intelligible forms of English. This is especially problematic given that phonics is designed to support reading comprehension by developing GPC knowledge and decoding skills, rather than to evaluate alignment with socially familiar pronunciation norms. Learning to read is increasingly framed as a human right, with the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (2022) *Right to Read* inquiry emphasising equitable access to literacy. Yet when correctness is defined through a single prestige accent, these standards risk compromising the linguistic rights of multilingual learners (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995).

This paper argues that phonics instruction requires re-examination in light of the many legitimate ways English phonemes are realised across global and local contexts. A more inclusive and linguistically responsive approach is needed—one that distinguishes between understanding how graphemes map to sounds in print and the varied ways those decoded forms may be pronounced. This includes recognising that children's oral production often reflects the phonetic structure of their first language or their own variety of English, and that such influences are common features of multilingual language development rather than signs of decoding difficulty. Attending to these patterns is therefore essential if phonics instruction and assessment are to avoid misidentifying accent-related variation as evidence of error and inadvertently promoting accent conformity as a proxy for reading accuracy.

The paper first traces the historical and policy trajectory that has brought phonics, and particularly synthetic phonics (SP), to its current prominence. Phonics has never been a neutral or purely pedagogical enterprise; its rise, decline, and subsequent revival have been shaped by political debate, curricular reform, and cycles of advocacy that repeatedly cast phonics as the solution to literacy challenges. The paper then uses evidence from the *Oxford English Dictionary* to illustrate how pronunciation varies systematically across Englishes. Drawing on this context, the discussion examines how standard language ideologies shape phonics instruction and assessment, before outlining the implications for multilingual speakers of English, speakers of different English varieties, teacher education, assessment design, and phonics policy in linguistically diverse classrooms.

2 Phonics as the "new" and "old" black

The prominence of phonics in contemporary policy and classrooms cannot be separated from the long-running disputes over how children should learn to read. These debates have recurred for centuries, oscillating between skills-focused and meaning-focused approaches. From the 16th century onwards, early reading instruction often relied on the alphabetic method, where children memorised the names of letters and spelled words aloud by reciting those names. For example, a child might spell *cat* as "see–ay–tee," even though the sequence of letter names bears little resemblance to the spoken word itself. This "alphabet method" or "ABC" approach was central to texts such as Benjamin Harris's *The New England Primer* (1690) and dominated reading instruction well into the late 18th century (cited in Beltramo (1954) and Emans (1968). Reformers such as Valentin Ickelshamer (1534) and John Hart (1570) challenged this practice, arguing instead for teaching sounds rather than letter names. Hart, a spelling reformer and phonetician, proposed one of the earliest phonological schemes for English aimed at bringing spelling closer to speech (Emans, 1968; Groff, 1977; Suárez, 1996). His illustration of how spelling *t–h–r* by letter names ("tee–aitch–ar") produced "te-adhe-er" rather than /θr/ (Emans, 1968, pp. 602–603) signalled the beginnings of phonics as a method of connecting graphemes with phonemes. Later, Benjamin Franklin advanced similar reformist ideas in *A Scheme for a New Alphabet and Reformed Mode of Spelling* (1768) while Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* (1783), popularly known as the *Blue-Back Speller*, popularised a sound-based approach.

Webster's *Blue-Back Speller* sold more than 100 million copies by the late 19th century, making it one of the most widely circulated American books after the Bible (Teach US History, n.d.). Yet Webster's main ambition was the creation of a distinct American linguistic identity. As he wrote, his goal was to "diffuse a uniformity and purity of language in America to destroy the provincial prejudices that originate in the trifling differences of dialect" (Webster, 1824, p. 132). In this sense, phonics operated as an instrument of cultural nation-building more than a pedagogical method. By the 1840s however, Horace Mann, often described as the "father of American education," criticised phonics for its monotony and drill-based character. Drawing on the influence of a Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), Mann promoted whole-word instruction that emphasised learning through meaningful wholes such as objects, pictures, and complete words, rather than abstract drills on letters and sounds (Harris, 1896; Hempenstall, 1997). His arguments were later reinforced by experimental psychology: James Cattell's (1886) *The Time It Takes To See And Name Objects* showed that whole words are recognised more quickly than individual letters, a finding still supported by contemporary psycholinguistic research (Snell & Grainger, 2017).

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the pendulum swung back toward phonics with a renewed emphasis on word families and phonetic patterns such as *-at* or *-ick*, what are now known as onset-rime units (Emans, 1968). Yet by the 1920s, meaning-based and silent reading methods again gained favour, as researchers such as Gates (1927), Sexton and Herron (1928), and Garrison and Heard (1931) sought to balance phonics with comprehension and diagnostic teaching. Analytic phonics emerged in the 1930s as a compromise, beginning with meaningful words and then analysing their parts (Hempenstall, 1997; Rogers, 1938). The pendulum swung back sharply mid-century with Rudolf Flesch's (1955) *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which condemned whole-word memorisation and argued that systematic pho-

nics was essential to literacy and democracy. Although influential, Flesch's claims were challenged for overstating the evidence (Hobkirk, 1956). Jeanne Chall's (1967) *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* concluded that systematic phonics produced superior outcomes in decoding, spelling, and comprehension, findings later reinforced by large-scale studies such as Bond and Dykstra (1967), the Follow Through project (House et al., 1978), and the Direct Instruction programme (Meyer et al., 1983). Subsequent reports such as *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985) reaffirmed phonics as foundational within a balanced literacy framework, while in England the *Bullock Report* (Department of Education and Science, 1975) similarly reignited public debate about methods of teaching reading. Across these historical cycles, the teaching of reading has repeatedly oscillated between skills-based and meaning-based approaches, shaped as much by political and cultural forces as by educational research, a tension commonly referred to as the "reading wars." Understanding this pattern helps explain why reading policy today remains such a contested and ideologically charged field.

Although some researchers and media commentators have claimed that "the reading wars are over and phonics has won" (Castles et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2020; Solity, 2020), such declarations often oversimplify the current state of early reading instruction. While policy consensus around the importance of phonics has solidified in many English language education systems, the debate has shifted from whether phonics should be taught to how it should be taught. Within the broad category of systematic phonics, endorsed by national reports and framed as evidence-based practice, there remain significant differences in approach. SP, which teaches children to identify individual phonemes in isolation and blend them to decode unfamiliar words, is often privileged in policy frameworks. For example, students may learn to segment and blend the sounds /s/–/a/–/t/ to read *sat*, often before encountering it in meaningful contexts. In contrast, analytic phonics begins with familiar whole words and encourages learners to identify common letter-sound patterns such as the initial *sh-* in *ship* and *shop* or rime units like *c–at*, *m–at*, and *s–at*—with less focus on isolated phoneme production.

Goswami (2008), drawing on cross-linguistic evidence from reading acquisition research, argues that both synthetic and analytic phonics approaches, including rime-based strategies embedded within analytic phonics, have an important role to play in supporting word recognition in English, a language with an exceptionally inconsistent orthographic system. Some words, such as *choir*, *people*, and *yacht*, must be memorised as whole patterns because they lack orthographic neighbours. Others like *light* include rime spellings (e.g., *-ight)* that can be generalised to other words such as *night*, *might*, and *fight*, helping students recognise consistent patterns. Meanwhile, words such as *cat*, *dog*, and *pen* are phonetically regular and well-suited to phoneme-level decoding. Goswami cautions that while small grain-size, phoneme-level instruction works particularly well in transparent orthographies, English requires a more flexible instructional model that draws on both phoneme- and rime-level consistencies. Despite this, recent policy developments have strongly favoured SP, often presenting it as the most rigorously "evidence-based" approach aligned with the science of reading. This emphasis has limited consideration of other systematic methods such as analytic phonics, despite research highlighting the importance of aligning instruction with learners' needs, linguistic backgrounds, and broader literacy goals (Wyse and Bradbury 2022a, b, 2023; Wyse and Goswami 2008; Wyse and Styles 2007).

The policy endorsements of systematic phonics, the dominance of SP in recent reforms, and the influence of reports such as the U.S.'s *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000), Australia's *Rowe Report* (Rowe, 2005), and the U.K.'s *Rose Report* (Rose, 2006) laid the groundwork for a policy-driven resurgence of phonics across English-speaking countries in the early 21st century. Under the banner of the "science of reading," systematic phonics, and particularly SP, has become the centrepiece of many national literacy reforms. In countries such as the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, policy mandates and screening checks now reflect this reassertion of phonics as a non-negotiable foundation of early literacy instruction.

In this policy climate, phonics is both the "new" and "old" black: a long-standing instructional practice revived and reframed through the language of neuroscience, data, and policy. Its aesthetic may have changed, but many of its core assumptions remain uncontested. Among these is the assumption that there is a single, standardised way of mapping graphemes to phonemes in speech—an expectation often embedded in phonics assessments and teaching and sometimes reinforced with references to codified norms such as those found in dictionaries. This assumption has received insufficient attention, despite its significant implications for instruction and equity in early literacy education.

3 Pronunciation variation in the *Oxford English Dictionary*

Entries in many English dictionaries, including the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), include written pronunciation guidance to help users read the words aloud correctly. This guidance comes in the form of written re-spellings or transcriptions using symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet, depending on the dictionary. Pronunciation guidance may also be offered in spoken form, through the provision of audio files of either synthesised or natural speech for the user to listen to.

James Murray, founder of the *OED*, regarded transcribed pronunciations as essential, since the dictionary sought to represent "the actual living form or forms of a word, that is, *the word itself*, of which the current spelling is only a symbolization" (Murray, 1888, p. xxiv). It is notable here that he refers to multiple forms of pronunciation, acknowledging even in 1888 the existence of variation and the need to reflect it. In the modern *OED*, pronunciation variation continues to be neutrally described rather than framed as deviation from a single norm. This challenges the way that major dictionaries are sometimes regarded or referred to, as if they should be bastions of a single standard. *OED* today includes pronunciation transcriptions in several global varieties of English. Every (non-obsolete) entry has a British English and American English pronunciation, which includes key variation within them such as short or long 'a' in British *bath* /baθ ~ bɑːθ/ or different open back vowels in American *paw* /pɔ ~ pɑ/ (presence or absence of the cot-caught merger). In addition, and of most significance in the context of this paper, pronunciations in 19 other varieties of English are also given and granted equivalent status to the British and American models. Systematic pronunciation models, keys, and sources for these varieties are shared at https://www.oed.com/information/understanding-entries/pronunciation/world-englishes/ (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.b.). These include the Englishes of Australia, Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, East Africa, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Malaysia, Malta, the Isle of Man, New Zealand, the Philippines, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Wales, and West Africa. All

the models are based on current sociolinguistic study and peer-reviewed description of the varieties in question. These lexicographic descriptions highlight that phonetic realisations of phonemes vary systematically across English varieties, which has implications for early literacy assessment where decoding accuracy is often evaluated through oral production.

There are many variable features of pronunciation which are present in some of *OED*'s English models and not in others. In this section we provide some specific examples of these features and the varieties of English in which they occur, to support our challenge to the notion that there is a single way of mapping graphemes to English phonemes. Perhaps the most significant is vowel length: British English has well-known pairs of short and long vowels such as /iː/ and /ɪ/ (*sheep* versus *ship*) and /uː/ and /ʊ/ (*boot* versus *book*). However, many other Englishes from around the world operate with a vowel system in which length is not a salient feature. In the speech of a speaker of these Englishes, these pairs of vowels are likely to be perceived as similar or identical, preventing a one-to-one mapping from grapheme to phoneme. Our models for such Englishes use a single symbol to transcribe the vowels in *ship* and *sheep*, and another single symbol for *boot* and *book*. This is true of *OED*'s Singapore English, Malaysian English, East African English, West African English, Philippine English, and Hong Kong English models, and also of the Scottish English model (solely in the case of the back vowels *boot*~*book*).

Another widespread variable is the pronunciation of some or all sounds which are diphthongs in the British English model, as in the words *face*, *pride*, *mouth*, *goat*, and *voice*, as monophthongs. This can be seen in *face* and *goat* in the Welsh English, Caribbean English, and Indian English models. A third variable can be seen in the many varieties of English (for example, East African English) which do not reduce vowels in unstressed syllables to the central unstressed schwa as much as British English does, instead producing a full vowel sound in all syllables. An exploration of the models identifies many other such differences—like the systematic vocalisation of syllable-final /l/ to /o/ in Hong Kong English in words such as *rattle* and the use of dental /t/ and /d/ stops, rather than fricatives /θ/and /ð/, in Irish English and Indian English for words such as *thaw* and *those*. In conclusion, the inclusion of multiple varieties of English in the *OED*'s pronunciations not only offers an inherent challenge to the notion that a learner-speaker's failure to perform a particular pronunciation in accordance with the norms of just one variety (e.g., Australian English) constitutes a general dysfluency or lack of English pronunciation competence, but also has the potential to provide a feature-specific framework for a more inclusive approach to assessing the pronunciation of English as a global language.

4 Discussion

The pronunciation evidence documented in the *OED* suggests that the current phonics instruction based on single model of GPC correspondences has often operated with implicit assumptions about spoken English that do not comprehesively reflect the diversity of English phonology. Phonics instruction concerns phonemic correspondences between graphemes and abstract sound categories, whereas spoken production reflects phonetic realisations that vary across English varieties and contexts. Both phonemic contrasts and phonetic realisations may differ across varieties of English, and these differences can shape how oral decoding responses are perceived in classroom assessment contexts. Recognising the distinction

between different phonemic categories and the multiple ways which these phonemes may be realised in speech across English varieties is therefore important in phonics instruction and assessment, because learners' knowledge of GPCs is often inferred from oral pronunciation.

How these phonetic differences are interpreted in educational contexts is not purely a linguistic matter but is also shaped by broader ideologies about Standard English and correct pronunciation. As Milroy (2001) observes, this ideology is sustained through prescriptivism and the persistent conflation of the standard with "proper" or "accurate" language use, even though such norms reflect social power rather than linguistic principles. Trudgill (1999) likewise argues that Standard English is simply one dialect among many with no intrinsic linguistic superiority, and that accent is not a defining feature of Standard English. Hickey (2012) further shows how historical processes of codification entrenched this hierarchy, elevating particular pronunciations while marginalising others. Within phonics instruction, these broader language ideologies can shape how pronunciation differences are interpreted during decoding tasks.

The historical trajectory traced earlier reveals that phonics has repeatedly been repackaged as the definitive solution to literacy challenges, often without re-examining the assumptions that accompany it. As phonics has cycled through periods of prominence, decline, and resurgence, classroom modelling of GPCs has often been realised through locally recognised and socially privileged pronunciation norms, which may implicitly position particular phonetic realisations as the instructional reference point. These assumptions have become embedded in policy frameworks and assessment tools, shaping expectations about how children and teachers should sound when demonstrating decoding skills. Recognising this historical pattern highlights that the pronunciation norms embedded in contemporary phonics instruction are not linguistically inevitable but historically and culturally inherited.

With the current emphasis on SP, where other cues are deliberately minimised and students' oral production becomes the primary observable evidence of phoneme knowledge, decoding accuracy is largely inferred from students' pronunciation of words during oral reading, leaving limited scope for recognising decoding knowledge when children's phonetic production differs from expected pronunciation norms. This creates a pedagogical paradox: SP is intended to support reading development through systematic attention to GPCs, yet students and teachers may be evaluated on how closely their oral output aligns with a socially privileged accent, sometimes at the expense of their underlying knowledge of GP relationships. Such practices risk reinforcing linguistic inequality and may misrepresent both students' developing decoding knowledge and teachers' instructional competence.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in education systems experiencing teacher shortages such as Australia, where overseas recruitment brings increased linguistic diversity into the teaching workforce. In Western Australia, applications are accepted from internationally trained teachers in the U.K., Ireland, Canada, and South Africa, contexts where GPCs may look and sound different from those in Standard Australian English (Department of Education WA, n.d.). In England, regional variation is also considerable, with only a small minority (about 3 to 5%) using the prestige variety traditionally known as Received Pronunciation (Hughes et al., 2013; Trudgill, 2001). Nonetheless, such prestige models continue to shape expectations in phonics instruction and screening, despite their limited representation among teachers and students.

Teachers with "accents" face additional challenges. Some teachers may feel pressured to align their pronunciation with perceived standard forms when modelling phonemes, even

when such modifications may be unnecessary or counterproductive. Expecting teachers to suppress their linguistic identities for the sake of conformity perpetuates the ideology of a single legitimate version of English sounds and may undermine both inclusivity and linguistic authenticity in the classroom. Crucially, such expectations are not required in supporting the development of decoding skills but instead uphold pronunciation norms unrelated to the core instructional goal of phonics, namely, to support reading.

5 Reframing phonics: what can be done?

To address the challenges outlined above, phonics instruction and assessment need to be re-examined through the lens of linguistic diversity and pedagogical purpose.

5.1 Linguistically responsive teacher education and professional development

Phonics training should explicitly address phonological variation across Englishes so teachers can respond with confidence to the diversity of speech in their classrooms. Teachers require an awareness of how English phonemes vary across regional, national, and global varieties, as well as an understanding that accurate decoding may be realised differently across accents and that such variation does not necessarily signal a decoding deficit.

Teacher preparation can incorporate real-world examples demonstrating that decoding may remain accurate even when spoken output differs from a given institutional or policy-preferred pronunciation model. For instance, a student from an Indian English background may pronounce *vine* and *wine* similarly, reflecting the reduced contrast between /v/ and /w/ found in some Indian English varieties, unlike in Australian English where the two sounds are typically distinguished. In Englishes with limited vowel reduction, such as many East African varieties, a word like *banana* may be produced with fuller vowels in all syllables. Consonant realisations may also vary: the grapheme *th* may be realised as /t/, /s/, or /d/ in some English varieties rather than as /θ/ or /ð/ as typically modelled in many standard varieties. Likewise, vowel contrasts such as *ship* /ɪ/ and *sheep* /iː/ may be realised with less contrastive vowel length in several English varieties.

These patterns are systematic, yet teachers and teacher education programmes operating in contexts where SP is promoted through policy often receive little guidance on how to interpret such variation. Without such guidance, students' decoding may be incorrectly judged when their oral production is compared against a single pronunciation model. Crucially, the purpose of phonics is to support reading development and GP knowledge, not to promote accent conformity. Teacher preparation should therefore emphasise that pronunciation variation is a normal and systematic feature of English and does not necessarily indicate inaccurate decoding.

5.2 Rethinking oral phonics screening checks

Oral phonics assessments that present isolated words without contextual or semantic support risk conflating decoding skill with conformity to a particular pronunciation norm. When students are asked to read decontextualised items aloud, assessors may rely primarily

on what sounds "correct" to them, which can be problematic in linguistically diverse classrooms where phonetic realisations vary across English varieties.

Existing phonics screening guidance acknowledges that pronunciation may vary across regional accents. For example, the UK Phonics Screening Check's scoring guidance states that pupils may use "all plausible alternative and regional pronunciations" (Standards and Testing Agency, 2025a), indicating that accent variation should not be penalised in decoding assessments. The scoring guidance also provides examples of acceptable pronunciation variants for particular items, suggesting that some regional variation is recognised within the assessment framework.

However, the criteria used to determine inclusion or omission of pronunciation variants are not explicitly specified, and the range of examples remains significantly limited relative to the diversity of English varieties encountered in contemporary classrooms. In practice, the limited range of listed variants may mean that assessors end up relying on their own familiarity with local pronunciation patterns when judging responses, introducing potential variability in how accent-related pronunciations are interpreted. At present, there is little empirical research examining how pronunciation variation is interpreted in phonics screening assessments or whether such assessments have been systematically evaluated for potential accent-related bias.

A more linguistically informed approach to phonics assessment therefore requires clearer differentiation between genuine GP misapplication and predictable accent-related variants. When pronunciation differences occur systematically across similar items, they may reflect features of a speaker's linguistic repertoire rather than evidence of decoding difficulty. Assessment design and scoring guidance would benefit from clearer recognition of such variation, including a broader range of acceptable pronunciation variants and more explicit guidance for assessors. This would help ensure that phonics screening measures evaluate GP knowledge rather than familiarity with particular pronunciation norms.

5.3 Gaps in evidence: plurilingual learners and varieties of English

There is limited empirical evidence on how classroom phonics practices and assessments account for plurilingual English learners or speakers of diverse English varieties. It remains unclear how teachers interpret accent-related variation, transfer from other phonological systems, or cross-linguistic influences during phonics instruction and assessment. Systematic reviews of the science of reading for multilingual learners emphasise the importance of first-language phonological and linguistic knowledge for developing English literacy (Kittle et al., 2024). However, mainstream phonics materials still assume a monolingual English phonemic inventory and a single model of pronunciation. The sequencing logic underpinning many SP programmes also draws on historical phonetic data from mid-20th-century British and American English analyses. As Cochrane and Brooks (2022) note, early sequences such as *satpin* were based on phoneme frequency studies that no longer reflect the state of contemporary English phonology. Given English's pluricentric nature and learner diversity, SP scope-and-sequence documents urgently require updating to reflect current linguistic realities.

6 Conclusion

The ultimate purpose of phonics instruction is to support reading comprehension by helping students link letters to sounds, not to evaluate whether their spoken output conforms to what is considered "standardised" pronunciation models. This raises a simple but often overlooked question: why should pronunciation matter in phonics instruction if the goal is reading comprehension? Phonics is intended to help children decode print; it is not a mechanism for regulating how words are spoken. Yet in practice, particularly through SP and oral phonics screening checks, students are judged solely on how closely their speech aligns with a preferred pronunciation. This shifts phonics from a tool for learning to read to a subtle mechanism for enforcing speech conformity, distorting its pedagogical intent and disadvantaging speakers of non-dominant varieties.

If SP is to be equitable and evidence-based, assessments and teaching practices must recognise legitimate variation and avoid conflating decoding with adherence to a single, standardised model of English. Recognising the phonological diversity that students bring to the classroom strengthens both the validity of assessment and inclusivity of early reading instruction. At the same time, there remains a notable absence of empirical research on how teachers assess and approach phonics instruction involving plurilingual learners, and on how students' diverse linguistic repertoires are interpreted in classroom phonics practices. Future research on teacher decision-making, assessment, and instructional responses is essential for developing phonics approaches that are inclusive, socially just, and responsive to multilingual classrooms.

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Authors and Affiliations

Hyejeong Ahn[1] · Catherine Sangster[2]

✉ Hyejeong Ahn
Hyejeong.ahn@unimelb.edu.au

Catherine Sangster
Catherine.Sangster@oup.com

[1] Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

[2] Oxford University Press (United Kingdom), Oxford, UK