Phonics and different English pronunciations

This paper relates to the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Standard 1:
Know students and how they learn

1.3 Students with diverse linguistic and cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds

Standard 2:
Know the content and how to teach it

2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area

Standard 3:
Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning

3.4 Select and use resources

Why is it important to recognise diverse varieties of English?

It is important for teachers to acknowledge the diverse varieties of English that students introduce to the classroom. It fosters an inclusive learning environment and raises awareness of the impact of varied pronunciation on responses to standardised testing of phonics as a discrete skill.

The 2021 Census reveals that almost half (49.1 %) of Victorians were either born overseas (first generation) or have at least one parent born overseas (second generation) (Victorian Government, 2022). The most substantial demographic of foreign-born residents is from India, followed by residents from England, China and New Zealand. According to the 2016 Census data, there has been a significant increase in the number of Indian-born Victorians. This population saw a 52% increase from 2011 to 2016. Moreover, approximately 260 languages are spoken in Victorian homes, with 27.6% of Victorians speaking a language other than English at home. Mandarin is the most spoken non-English language, followed by Italian and Greek.

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However, several Asian languages, including Vietnamese, Arabic, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and Tagalog, have experienced a dramatic increase in their representation in Victoria.

These demographics bear significant pedagogical implications for the teaching and assessment of phonics. Teaching phonics in a way that acknowledges these diverse language backgrounds and English varieties not only enriches the student learning experience but also promotes inclusivity. This ensures that every student, irrespective of their linguistic or cultural heritage, feels acknowledged, listened to, and appreciated. This contributes to improved learning outcomes and nurtures an environment of mutual respect and understanding in classrooms. Customising phonics instruction and evaluation methods to mirror the multilingual landscape and the range of English varieties prevalent in modern Australian classrooms is important in teaching reading.

World Englishes and Varieties of English Pronunciations

The concept of World Englishes refers to the diverse and dynamic spectrum of English varieties around the globe. These variations reflect the cultural, social, and historical circumstances of their respective English-speaking communities. Although sharing a common core, each variety of English has distinct features in vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and even pragmatic use.

Broadly, World Englishes can be organised into three main circles: The Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1986). The Inner Circle refers to traditional English-speaking countries like the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Outer Circle includes countries where English was introduced through colonisation or similar means, such as India, Nigeria, and the Philippines. The Expanding Circle includes countries where English is learned as a foreign language, such as China, Germany, and Brazil.

Each circle represents distinct varieties of English, which subsequently influence the utilised pronunciation models. For example, Inner Circle countries like the UK primarily recognise the Received

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Pronunciation model, colloquially referred to as the 'Queen's English.' Australia typically uses Standard Australian English, whereas General American English is common in the United States of America.

In Outer Circle countries, new English varieties and corresponding pronunciation models have developed, shaped by local languages and culture. Unique pronunciations in Indian English and Philippine English distinguish them from Inner Circle Englishes reflecting the phonological patterns of the many local languages in these countries. Within the Expanding Circle, pronunciation models are primarily influenced by Inner Circle countries' pronunciation model and the learner's first language, resulting in a spectrum of "Englishes" with unique phonological traits. Pronunciation is also influenced by the curriculum used to inform language learning as well as how and where this occurred.

It is important to note that within each circle, there are sub-varieties like Aboriginal English and Koorie English. Koorie English is a recognised variety of English, comparable to Standard Australian English, and is spoken by members of Koorie communities throughout Victoria. Though categorising English varieties based on countries presents some challenges, it nevertheless effectively underscores the multitude of recognised and utilised English varieties. The Victorian Curriculum's Language Strand recognises the multiplicity of English varieties and their evolving nature, in the Language, variation and change sub-strand.

Acknowledging a variety of English and its associated pronunciation, particularly in phonics instruction and assessment, is paramount. Instead of rigid adherence to specific phonological patterns, a more inclusive strategy respectful of students' distinct linguistic and cultural identities should be considered. This can be achieved through maintaining requirements for students to learn the formal use of Standard Australian English, whilst encouraging learners to confidently communicate when there may be pronunciation variations. The aims of the English curriculum are ultimately the same for all students, beginning with an understanding how Standard Australian English works in its spoken and written forms and in combination with non-linguistic forms of communication to create meaning. For students for whom English is not their home language, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority provides the English as an Additional Language curriculum to support both their language needs and to further develop their language proficiency.

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What are examples of different English pronunciations?

This section explores the pronunciation patterns of certain sounds of various English varieties often encountered in our schools and broader society. These analyses are based on models provided by the Oxford English Dictionary for British and American English and the Macquarie English Dictionary for Australian English. It is important to note that these are based on the most occurring patterns documented by respective dictionaries, and actual pronunciation can vary greatly depending on regional accents and individual speech habits. To see the phonetic alphabet provided by the Oxford English Dictionary, click for Key to pronunciation: British English and Key to pronunciation: U.S. English. To see the phonetic alphabet provided by the Macquarie English Dictionary, click for pronunciation key.

Differences in vowels:

Short Vowel
/æ/ and /a/: b<u>a</u>t, c<u>a</u>t, h<u>a</u>t, m<u>a</u>t and r<u>a</u>t

The quality of the short vowel sound in bat, cat etc. is fully open in British English transcribed as **/a/**, and near-open in American English and Standard Australian English transcribed as **/æ/**.

Long Vowel
/ɑ:/ /a/, and /ɑr/: f<u>a</u>ther, c<u>a</u>r and p<u>a</u>rk

British English uses the long vowel **/ɑ:/** sound in words like "father", "car", and "park", similar to the shorter vowel in Standard Australian English: the /a/ sounds a bit like "fahdhuh", "kah", "pahk". American English, however, utilises the **/ɑr/** sound. A notable difference lies in the pronounced "r" sound following the vowel in words such as "car" or "park". This pronunciation can give the impression of appending an "er" to the end of a word.

Interesting notes:

Looking at Indian English, regional variations in pronunciation become evident. The "ar" in "start", for example, is pronounced as /ɑ:(r)/, "force" as /oː(r)/, and "here" as /ɪə(r)/. The presence of an "r" at the end is optional and varies across different regions of India. More information on Indian English pronunciations can be found Indian English Pronunciation in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Examining Koorie English, it typically omits the "h" sound at the beginning of words, while sometimes adding an "h" sound where one is not usually present. For instance, "<u>H</u>enry's hat" might be pronounced as "Enry's at," and "He had an operation" could become

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"E ad a hoperation." Aboriginal languages rarely include "f", "v", or "th" sounds, so "fight" becomes "bight", "river" transforms to "riber", and "then" is pronounced as "den". More information on Koorie English can be found in [Module 1- What is Koorie English](#).

Differences in diphthongs (gliding vowels):

Diphthong
/oʊ/ or /əʊ/: go, home, flow, show, and slow

A diphthong is a sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable. Standard Australian English and American English utilise /oʊ/ for these words. It starts with a sound somewhat like the "o" in "not" (for many English speakers) and moves toward the sound of "oo" as in "book". However, it is pronounced as one smooth sound, which makes it sound similar to the exclamation "oh".

British English, on the other hand, often pronounces this sound as /əʊ/. This sound starts with a schwa, a neutral vowel sound which is often found in unstressed syllables in English (like the "a" in "about"), and it then moves toward the "oo" sound as in "foot" or "look". The initial sound is less rounded than in American English and Standard Australian English.

Let's consider the following two students

Jason, aged 6, who recently moved to Australia from the UK, joined a Victorian school midway through the third term. He was placed in the Foundation class. Jason had already developed some phonological awareness of English sounds during his time in the UK. For example, he was familiar with the sound of /a/, as in the words "cat", "mat", and "rat".

Upon starting school in Victoria, Jason was introduced to the sound of /æ/, illustrated with the words "bat", "hat", and "sat". However, when his Australian teacher asked whether "cat" rhymes with "bat", Jason hesitated. After some thought, he responded with a "no". According to him, "cat" rhymes with "mat" and "rat", but not with "bat". Although he recognised a similarity in sound, he didn't consider them perfect rhymes.

Let's also consider Hana, aged 7 from Korea. After arriving, Hana is excited about her first day in her new Australian primary school. She is particularly eager about her English class, where they are introducing phonics—a brand new concept for her.

The teacher begins with the /f/ and /p/ sound. She shows the students how to position their teeth and lips, then demonstrates with the word

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"fat" and "pat". Hana attempts to repeat them but struggles, as the differences between the /f/ and /p/ sound don't exist in her native Korean.

Later, the class moves on to a rhyming activity. The teacher writes a few words on the board: "pat" "fat" "cat", "hat", "bat", "rat". Hana notices that the words have similar endings, but the act of rhyming isn't common in Korean, making it a novel concept for her.

Over the next few weeks, Hana continues to face challenges. The English /r/ and /l/ sounds, represented by the same letter in Korean, just like "p" and "f", prove very tricky. Her teacher uses tongue twisters as a fun way to help students practice tricky sounds. One of Hana's favourites is "red lorry, yellow lorry", but this was not an easy task for her. Silent letters also baffle Hana. She can't understand why "knife" isn't pronounced "ka-ni-fe", as it would be in Korean, where every letter is always pronounced according to her understanding.

Jason's experiences with varied accents and pronunciations in Australia emphasise the intricacies of adapting his phonological understanding. As educators, it's crucial to gauge his current phonological awareness and bridge the gap between his home British English and the school's language environment. Hana's situation is similar, repeatedly facing phonological differences in her phonics classes. She can perceive distinct consonant sounds, but replicating them, given her language background, proves challenging.

Teaching phonics and phonological awareness in a classroom with non-native Australian English speakers holds its complexities. Students usually consolidate their phonological awareness through their parents' or carers' speech. However, inconsistencies between phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences at home and those taught in school can lead to significant challenges. As educators, it is critical to navigate these complexities and foster a conducive learning environment for every student.

What about other varieties of English?

We present selected examples featuring different varieties of English that might be encountered in Australian schools. These analyses are based on models provided by the Macquarie Dictionary for Australian English and the Oxford English Dictionary for other English pronunciations. For more detailed information on pronunciations of World Englishes, please refer to [Pronunciations for World Englishes](#).

Vowel differences

Fleece and Fit: A Comparison of Short and Long Vowels

In Standard Australian English, the vowels in the words "fleece" and "fit" differ in length. However, this contrast in vowel length is not present in the English of Singapore/Malaysia and the Philippines, where these vowels are pronounced with the same length.

Goat: The vowel sound in the word "goat" varies in different varieties of English. It's a diphthong with a back onset in Standard Australian English /oʊ/. The onset is more central in South African and British English, /əʊ/. In New Zealand English, the onset is between a back and central position, and the endpoint is higher and fronter, transcribed as /ʌu/. In Indian and Singapore and Malaysian English, it is a long monopthong, /oː/, and it's also a monophthong in Philippine English.

Voice: Most varieties use a diphthong /ɔɪ/, including Standard Australian English. Yet, in Standard Australian English, the onset is raised, hence its representation can be shown as /oɪ/. On the other hand, New Zealand English exhibits a higher onset and a lower endpoint, signified as /oe/.

Consonant differences

While the range of vowel sound variation across different English varieties is significant, the differences in consonant sounds are less pronounced. For instance, in Standard Australian English, the word "thing" is pronounced as /θɪŋ/, whereas in Indian English, an additional "g" sound is appended, realising it as /θɪŋg/. Moreover, in Standard Australian English, the consonants in "win" and "vet" are distinctly realised as "w" and "v", respectively. Conversely, in Indian English, both are realised with the same "ʋ" sound, akin to "v". It is important to note, however, that pronunciation can still vary within these Englishes due to regional accents, individual speaker differences, and other influencing factors.

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How can phonics teaching be supported in the classroom?

Phonics instruction operates on the principle of letter-sound correspondence, positing that each letter of the alphabet represents a certain sound or group of sounds, and may also represent more than one sound or groups of sounds. This process involves connecting the letters in written language to the sounds in spoken language. However, these sounds can vary substantially among different varieties of English. Therefore, it's important to acknowledge that English pronunciation is not uniformly consistent across different geographic regions that will be reflected in many Victorian classrooms when teaching students about phonics. Flexibility is paramount when teaching rhymes, as accent and pronunciation variations might mean that certain words don't rhyme perfectly.

Given this, the present reading instruction is designed to raise awareness and understanding of these differences in pronunciation among the varied Englishes. The goal is to support students and acknowledge these differences, provided they do not impede effective communication in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Such understanding aligns with the language strand of the Victorian English curriculum nurtures a more nuanced grasp of the English language and aids in developing listening skills and awareness of pronunciation differences. Teachers can highlight the pronunciation disparities across different English varieties.

The two examples with Jason and Hana highlight the necessity for a contextually considered teaching and assessment strategy, bearing in mind the unique challenges encountered by students learning English as a first or additional language.

Acknowledgement:

This reading topic has greatly benefited from the invaluable assistance of Dr Catherine Sangster, who serves as the Executive Editor and Head of Pronunciations at Oxford Languages, Oxford University Press. In this link, Dr Catherine Sangster talks about different English pronunciations across different Englishes.

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# Suggestions for further discussion

1. Reflect on your current phonics teaching practices. Which pronunciations do you consider as "right" and how could you adjust these perceptions to promote inclusivity in your classroom?

2. How can you connect home language/English varieties and your understanding of English pronunciation as a teacher?

3. When these variations do not interfere with communication, how do you accommodate the distinct differences in English expressed by your students, particularly when assessing specific phonetic elements as discrete skills?
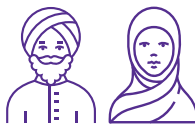
4. What would you consider when teaching students with a variety of home or community linguistic backgrounds? How has this topic extended or challenged your thinking about the teaching of phonics? What are your next steps?

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