

## **So you want a “British accent”? Accent Bias in EFL textbooks for teenagers available in Argentina**

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### **Resumen**

En el ámbito de la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) prevalece el uso de la RP por encima de otros acentos hablantes nativos. Si bien la hegemonía de la RP está en declive en el Reino Unido, es el acento predominante al que están expuestos los estudiantes, tanto en los materiales didácticos, como en los modelos de pronunciación de los docentes. Este trabajo se propone analizar el sesgo de acento en libros de texto de ILE, como primer acercamiento a la problemática, que ha sido menos estudiado que otros tipos de sesgo (como el de género, por ejemplo). A partir del análisis comparado de acentos regionales británicos, rastreamos qué marcadores fonéticos contrastantes con la RP están presentes en los audios del material seleccionado con el fin de determinar el grado de sesgo en términos de fragmentación, invisibilidad, estereotipación e irre realidad. Encontramos que hay no solo una subrepresentación de los acentos regionales, sino también que, de estar presentes, son fuertemente neutralizados. La presencia de diferentes acentos, así como de sus marcadores fonéticos, se corresponde con la jerarquía de prestigio sociolingüístico asociados a los mismos. También encontramos que la inclusión de diversidad acentual no se corresponde en ninguna línea de libros de texto con un principio de introducción paulatina. Concluimos que es necesario que los docentes de ILE tengan un juicio crítico respecto de los sesgos presentes en el material disponible, procuren crear conciencia de la diversidad acentual y problematicen los modelos de pronunciación.

**Palabras clave:** acento, sesgo, sesgo de acento, libros de ILE

### **Abstract**

In the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the use of RP prevails over other native speaker accents. Although the hegemony of RP is in decline in the United Kingdom, it is the predominant accent to which students are exposed, both in teaching materials and in teachers' pronunciation models. This work aims to analyze accent bias in EFL textbooks, as a first approach to the problem, which has been less studied than other types of bias (such as gender, for example). Based on the comparative analysis of British regional accents, we trace which phonetic markers contrasting with RP which are present in the audios of the selected material, in order to determine the degree of bias in terms of fragmentation, invisibility, stereotyping and unreality. We found that there is not only an under-representation of regional accents, but also that, if present, they are strongly neutralised. The presence of different accents, as well as their phonetic markers, corresponds to the hierarchy of sociolinguistic prestige associated with them. We also found that the inclusion of accentual diversity does not correspond in any textbook line to a principle of gradual introduction. We conclude that it is necessary for EFL teachers to be critical of the biases present in the available material, and try to raise awareness of accent diversity and problematise pronunciation models.

**Keyword:** accent, bias, accent bias, EFL textbooks.

## Introduction

The UK has some of the highest levels of accent diversity in the English-speaking world. From “traditional” accents like Cockney or Scouse to accents emerging more recently, such as Estuary English or Multicultural London English, accents in the UK reflect regional differences as well as differences in social class background, age and other features.

Currently, RP’s prevalence is on the decline, and it is said to be the native accent for only about 3% of the UK population. Nevertheless, RP remains the standard and has traditionally been considered the most prestigious accent of British English.

As regards EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching, certain native speaker accents are considered to be ‘traditional’ because of their usage by teachers, classroom listening materials and student preference. Such “desirable” accents have largely been Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA), reflecting common EFL students’ aspirations for their model for pronunciation.

For EFL students, broad regional accents might be judged in terms of a lack of intelligibility due to a lack of exposure to such accents. Negative judgments and intelligibility are interrelated in the sense that, if certain accents are avoided for classroom teaching, EFL students will subsequently be less exposed to them.

Bias in EFL textbooks is a well-researched topic, especially gender, cultural and speaker bias (native vs non-native speaker); but, there is little said on how different native speaker accents from the UK are represented in EFL textbooks. This topic is of great importance for EFL teachers: we have received the legacy of the hegemony of RP, and been instructed to model RP for students, who traditionally encounter it as the quintessential “British accent”.

However, considering the decline of RP, are we really equipping students to understand British speakers?

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Linguistic inequality**

Lay people consider some varieties of language better than others, but the scientific consensus is that even the least prestigious varieties are as rich and complex, and in no objective way inferior to prestige varieties. This phenomenon points to a type of linguistic inequality related to social inequality: Subjective linguistic inequality emerges from how people think about each other's speech, ascribing character and abilities simply on the basis of how the person speaks (Hudson, 1998).

Indeed, an accent serves to portray people socially, culturally and politically. Therefore, rather stereotypical notions are ascribed to the speaker based on their accent. Ideally, as we begin to know the person more intimately, we discover that a shared (or unshared) accent does not necessarily equate to the assumed attributes. Nevertheless, the existence of such stereotypes and the inequality resulting from them is indeed real.

It is worth noticing that the negative stereotyping of different British accents has been researched more deeply recently. For instance, Bishop and Coupland (2007) carried out a large-scale survey to assess the ideologised values of British accents, through a study enquiring about evaluations of accent varieties across sub-groups of British respondents. The findings confirm prejudicial attitudes towards accents, with low levels of prestige and attractiveness for ethnically linked accents and urban vernaculars. Additionally, regional accents, such as the so-called Celtic varieties, enjoy high ratings of prestige, social attractiveness, or both, especially due to their own speakers' pride in their accent. However, a standard accent of English and an

accent similar to my own (option which the respondents could choose to indicate their own accent, regardless of what it might be) are both strongly favoured, while some regional varieties, such as Birmingham English and Black Country English, are the least prestigious varieties and were ranked among the least socially attractive varieties. Other regional varieties, such as Southern Irish English and Newcastle English, are rated far higher on their relative scales for attractiveness than for prestige, while London English and North American-accented English are ranked higher for prestige than for attractiveness.

The existence of such ideologised values for accents can be understood as part of sociopolitical and economical processes throughout history. Baratta (2018) argues that, from the historical point of view, the variety chosen as the standard form of English was one based on the language used by the upper classes. The selection serves to divide along lines of class and, by extension, privilege, thus reinforcing the authority which is the source of its dominance.

As the standard form is associated with power, status and authority, the term 'non-standard' connotes less legitimacy in some way. Because of the prestigious associations, speakers of standard English, or RP accent, may have connotations of a higher class ascribed to them by interlocutors. Those who speak with 'deviant' forms of language are placed lower on the social scale. In fact, aspiring to upward social mobility might call for some a change to an accent variety more reflective of a higher class background. (Baratta and Halenko, 2022)-

In relation to the assessments of attractiveness, Baratta (2018) argues that there is nothing objectively beautiful or ugly about phonemes or its allophonic variations. For example, a glottal stop is, from a purely phonological view, simply a release of the airstream after closure of the glottis. From a societal

point of view, however, it suggests lower educational levels and informal speech, both of which might be regarded as inappropriate for classroom usage.

However, it is often argued that it is quite valuable in EFL teaching to demonstrate how native speakers actually speak, and avoid textbook English, which is not always reflective of the real world. If the features of someone's speech (such as reductions) were considered a source of unintelligibility, banning them might seem fair in teaching contexts. However, this call may simply mask some judgment on standard for 'proper' speech derived from linguistic inequality. After all, advocating for a uniform way of speaking for teachers (or students) goes against the fact that a wide variety of native accents can be encountered in exchange experiences, or the growing trend of a wider variety of accents in media.

Accents are not monolithic entities, and it makes sense for our analysis to discuss various regional accents in terms such as broad and general, or neutral. Ramsaran (2015) offers a helpful insight to understand this issue. In her view, a neutral accent avoids the more local sounds of a given region. Thus, 'neutral' points more indefinitely to a geographical location. For example, by removal of glottal stops, a Cockney accent might sound 'less Cockney' and thus, the speaker not only is removing a phoneme associated with a very specific region, but also the specific connotations of it. Neutral is a placeholder concept for accents which, at their extreme, remove all traces of regional origins. Neutral accents do not involve the complete removal of all local features but rather, a curated selection (as cited in Baratta, 2018, p. 66).

On the other hand, RP is itself changing and has taken on some regional influence (Lindsay, 2019.) Conversely, there are regional accents which, by

virtue of the removal of certain features, can be referred to as less local and more general or 'neutral'.

### **Decline of RP and RP as a model in educational contexts**

In today's Britain there is much more accent diversity within the media. BBC English is no longer synonymous with RP, as regional newscasters tend to use their regional accents. If we are being exposed to more regional varieties within media contexts, this suggests a reflection of such varieties within the classroom too. The tendency to neutralise regional accents in educational contexts is not merely related to potential intelligibility, as it may indeed reflect a preference for certain varieties over others (Baratta and Halenko, 2022).

While RP had its phonological origins in the southeast, it exists today as an accent which denotes one's class identity. The connotations of such can be higher education, wealth and overall privilege. The linguistic pyramid of prestige places RP on the top in terms of social standing, with broad regional accents at the bottom.

Mompean and Hernández-Campoy (2001) point out some advantages of using RP as a standard for EFL:

- Sociolinguistically, RP has shown to be more advantageous in terms of social status and education, perceived competence, suitability for more prestigious jobs and elicitation of cooperation from others.
- Native speakers utter value judgements over the correctness, appropriateness and aesthetics of varieties. RP is considered to be more prestigious than other accent variations.
- It is readily available, as it is very easy to find RP constantly spoken by radio and TV announcers, hosts and many public figures.
- It is the most fully described accent in books.

- They also point out disadvantages, such as:
- EFL speakers' limitations in their aural comprehension. A minority of English speakers speak RP, therefore it is likely that EFL speakers may understand with difficulty the majority of British speakers. This restriction is objectionable as EFL learners are expected to understand several accents but are exposed to only one.
- RP is an accent more phonetically difficult to acquire than other accents due to non-rhoticity and higher number of diphthongs.
- Sociolinguistically, RP has shown to be less socially attractive than other accent varieties. Social attractiveness includes sincerity, trustworthiness, friendliness, generosity, and so on and RP speakers are perceived to lack that.

Trudgill (2002) claims that while RP as the standard British accent is now declining, Estuary English (EE) is on the rise. However, this is not to suggest that EE is simply a replacement standard, as it has not been 'institutionally imposed' the way RP has. Instead, EE is more a linguistic result of social levelling, rather than imposition. This might be a reflection of a more egalitarian society, which influences language. Thus, the imposition of another new standard would not be reflective of the current trends in British society (as cited in Baratta, 2018, p. 65).

### **Bias in textbooks**

In their seminal paper, Sadker and Zittleman (2007) evaluate gender discrimination in textbooks, and define seven forms of bias. This framework is useful for analysing other types of bias as well, and it has been widely used to analyse not only gender, but also cultural and speaker bias in textbooks. Some of these are relevant to our discussion of accent bias in EFL textbooks, including:



- **Invisibility:** Minority groups or historical events related to them are not taught becoming part of a null curriculum. Consequently, students are deprived of information about important parts of society. We could argue, as Mompean and Hernández-Campoy do, that, if some accents or some accent features are not present in the EFL coursebooks, learners are likely to be at a loss to understand them.
- **Fragmentation:** This form of bias occurs when textbooks place information about the minority group in a special section, separating its discussion from the main narrative. Such isolation presents these groups and the issues concerning them as interesting diversions, but not part of the mainstream of history, literature, or the sciences. Accent wise, it could be considered whether regional accents are included in the syllabus only if a particular geographical region is the topic of the lesson or, conversely, whether EFL students can hear different accents regardless of the content of the lesson.
- **Stereotyping:** Assigning rigid roles or traits to all members of a group creates a stereotype that denies individual attributes and differences. In the case of regional accents, it may be worth exploring whether, if present in EFL textbooks, the speakers of different accents are constructed in nuanced or stereotypical ways (e.g. a speaker with a Birmingham accent is uneducated).
- **Unreality:** Curricular materials often depict society in an illusionary manner. Texts often ignore class differences, continuing discrimination, so students are being treated to romanticised and sanitized narratives. In the case of EFL coursebooks and the way they deal with accent exposure, learners are often misled to believe that most speakers of UK society are RP and therefore their culture and lifestyle are homogeneous.

Sherman (2010) emphasises the importance of textbooks as “the centrepiece of most TESOL classrooms”, pointing out the large amount of time students spend working with them and the large amount of instructional decisions teachers make based on them. He points out that “if TESOL teachers fail to confront textbook bias, these educators are implicitly supporting as well as possibly socialising their students into accepting it” (p.27).

## **Literature review**

### **What are the models of pronunciation like in Argentina?**

In his discussion of the evolution of the standard for British pronunciation, Upton (2012) reviews not only the recent changes in RP—the historical model for pronunciation—but also the testimonies of two EFL professionals, one of them from Argentina, which is of special interest for us. Mr José Tiziani, a phonetics lecturer, teacher trainer, language school coordinator and EFL teacher, denounces how obsolete the language descriptions are and the conservatism of the models for teacher-training pronunciation. He says:

Sociolinguistic variation in description cannot but be welcome in the Argentine EFL context, even when RP is bound to be the set model choice for many years to come. Additionally, updated descriptions need to find a way into ELT material aimed both at pronunciation training specifically and at language teaching in general. (...) We must adopt a model for pronunciation instruction, and it better be an updated one”. (as cited in Upton, 2012, p. 69)

Upton (2012) concludes that there seems to be a need to acknowledge linguistic change, and “embrace advanced or even more speculative features of English pronunciation than might realistically be admitted to RP at present (T-glottalling and L-vocalisation, for example)” (p. 70).

## **What accents are there in EFL books?**

As Huber (2022) remarks, much more attention is paid in the literature to the distinction between native and non-native accents than to the plurality of native standards. He says:

In other words, while the underrepresentation of non-native speakers and their lingua franca English varieties is a common theme in applied linguistics literature (...), the fact that the native standards themselves are diverse and not equally represented in different segments of language teaching is much less in the spotlight. (Su, 2016)

For example, in his exploration of cultural bias, Sherman (2010) analyses how the non-native speakers are being presented in comparison to native speakers in EFL textbooks. There is indeed bias towards the non-native speaker, in the forms of fragmentation, as well as the social roles they are attributed. Additionally, Sherman points out that other areas that need further study are English varieties and international English in EFL materials, as he points out that native speakers in the textbooks he analysed tended to use a GA accent, and the non-natives tended to also use an accented, albeit standard GA.

In this respect, it is interesting to review Scheiwe's (2022) research on what varieties of English are present in German EFL textbooks. She points out:

the apparent general consensus among scholars is that ELT materials should include more variation—and more specifically more different varieties of English—as there has been little focus on the representation of individual varieties, and variation within these varieties, in these materials. (p. 61)

It has been shown that exposure to and familiarity with World Englishes contributes to higher perceived comprehensibility in learners, and the advantages of being exposed to different accents of English include easier accommodation to and understanding of interlocutors with a different L1 (as cited in Scheiwe, 2010, p. 61).

The scarcity of further papers exploring the issue of exposure to different native English varieties in educational materials points to a need to further enquire about the topic of accent bias in EFL textbooks.

Interestingly, Huber explores the question of how and to what extent the pluricentricity of English is reflected in specific textbook series, as he does a research akin to ours and analyses two EFL coursebook series that are widely used in Hungary, covering the full range of CEFR levels from A1 to C1. Huber argues that an ideal textbook should contain audio materials from a wide range of standard varieties at all linguistic levels. Pluricentricity goes beyond vocabulary, and it manifests itself at all levels of the linguistic system, from phonetics and phonology to grammar and pragmatics.

Huber advocates for a gradual introduction of pluricentric content, admitting that it is not worth introducing too much linguistic variety at the beginning of the language learning process because of the extra burden on learners. In his research, Huber finds that the “meaningful coexistence” of divergent norms is largely absent in the textbooks he analysed and there is a very strong British English dominance. Since British English is only one of the two (co-)dominant English standards, alongside GA, its hegemony in the textbooks discriminates not only against the non-dominant standard varieties, but also against the dominant American English standard, to the detriment of learners, whose best interest would dictate a balanced presentation of the different standard varieties.

### **What are students' attitudes towards accent varieties?**

In an overview of the main findings from a European-wide online survey of English pronunciation teaching practices, Henderson et al (2012) find that university students recognise the relevance of native speaker models and express a strong preference for RP. However, they do not necessarily believe they will be able to reach the goal of native-like accent. The survey reveals that although RP is still the dominant variety for both reception and production, GA seems to be gaining prevalence. They point out that it might be quite common to find "a mismatch between materials and context when non-native English speakers, who might feel most comfortable teaching RP, are faced with a set of youngsters who, obsessed with American games or TV, have an American accent" (Henderson et al, 2012, p. 24).

When analysing different studies concerning Croatian learners attitudes towards different varieties of accents and their teacher's accents, Mandarić (2006) reaches the conclusion that

most people are aware of their accent and that they want to sound as native-like as possible, which also proves that, in a way, they do idealize a certain native accent and they consider their goal to achieve it. Nevertheless, they seem to be more liberal towards slight foreign accents than expected, which comes to show that they might prefer a certain accent and they might want to sound as native-like as possible, but their main goal is successful communication. (p.38)

Similarly, Candan (2020) researches the issue in "EFL Learners' Perceptions on Different Accents of English and (Non) Native English-Speaking Teachers in Pronunciation Teaching". In the Iranian context, Sa'd (2018) investigated perceptions of non-native English speakers toward accented speech in some

parts of his study. He found out that the participants perceived native-speaker accents quite positively, and that they had very clear negative attitudes as well as negative stereotypes toward non-native English speakers' accents. The participants expressed that they wanted to sound similar to native speakers while speaking English since they considered them as "the best model of English accent" (as cited in Candan, 2020).

There is a prevalence of RP and GA as pronunciation models, and speakers all over the world have ranging attitudes from accepting communicative competence but aspiring to native-like pronunciation, to downright accepting only native-like pronunciation as correct one, being RP and GA the models to emulate. We can see the relevance of this series of studies for our research in that there is indeed an inherent correlation between the prestige the native accent has and its prevalence in EFL learning.

### **What are the experiences of native teachers who are not RP speakers?**

In this respect, it is worthwhile considering the experiences of native British EFL teachers who are not RP speakers. Is their native accent still positively regarded?

In the paper "Attitudes toward regional British accents in EFL teaching: Student and teacher perspectives", Baratta and Halenko (2022) carried out an investigation which consisted of interviewing 20 British EFL teachers who are not RP speakers. They were asked to discuss both previous and current teaching experiences in a variety of international settings and in the UK in order to discover attitudes toward their accents in professional contexts of teaching.

Overall, the teacher testimonials report the teachers regard their accents as something to be celebrated, in most cases, rather than derided. This points to the fact that perceptions of accents—and their speakers—are in the ear of the

beholder. When teaching students who have no familiarity with regional accents, the fact that such accents are initially difficult to understand is not, in itself, a particularly negative issue, as reported by the participants.

Rather, the results show that the negative stereotyping is absent precisely because of a lack of knowledge regarding not just the accent, but the regional origins and associated stereotypes. Moreover, the lack of familiarity leads students to approach their teachers' accents with curiosity and interest.

In the cases where teachers did admit to modifying their accents, they presented it as largely a pragmatic response, to aid comprehension. It is important to note that such modification, if chosen by the teachers themselves, is overall accepted. But for one of the interviewed teachers who was specifically told by a staff member to change to more Southern pronunciation, the picture is more complex. In this case, it was suggested that her Northern accent was a liability for teaching. But overall, it is clear that in spite of such negative comments made about teachers' accents, the students themselves were accepting of the (mostly) Northern accents, in a variety of countries where teachers were employed.

These findings exemplify the linguistic reality of accent variety in the UK. Any negativity toward teachers' accents does not derive from their students but rather, it is the staff—themselves native British speakers—who suggest changes to neutralise the teachers' accents. This illustrates that there is indeed a suggested 'standard' or 'teaching' accent. Nonetheless, the teachers otherwise were able to use their 'native' accents to the benefit of their students: the experience of teaching overseas helped to avoid any 'linguistic baggage' being replicated there.

This paper sheds light on the general accent modification by teachers, and student's limited exposure to accents. RP prestige is tangible in EFL teaching

institutions, as is the effect that it has on the way native teachers speak, and the effect on students who encounter such accents.

### **What's the effect of exposure to accents on listening comprehension?**

Buyukahiska and Uyar (2019) study the effects of different accents on listening comprehension using seven different listening tapes in different accents. The rationale for this choice was that English is a lingua franca. Therefore, it may display a diverse range of characteristics, as some words may be pronounced differently by different speakers around the world. The authors argue that this is a neglected matter in EFL classroom settings, where the listening skill is usually practised with pedagogical tapes recorded in a presumably monolithic native British accent, far away from reflecting the real use of the language outside the classroom.

Not surprisingly, they find that the most easily understood accent by a good margin (20%) is British, followed by Australian (60% of success) and Argentinian and Chinese (40% of success). It is worth mentioning that the worst ranked accent was a native one, Irish. Their findings suggested that participants were at a disadvantage when practising listening skills based on a particular accent they are not familiar with, while performing with remarkable success in tests based on accents they were familiar with.

Buyukahiska and Uyar conclude:

In the case of the problems with the Irish accent, the distinctive pronunciation style of the Irish people probably caused participants to perform a poor level of success. In a gap-filling test in which basic vocabulary items of English language were expected to be recognized, the participants failed. It is disputable whether the result is shocking or justifiable for participants in a test with very basic vocabulary items asked, such as babies, married, lot, town,



and so on. It is rather justifiable when the pronunciation differences are examined. For example, a very basic word town is normally pronounced as /taʊn/ in British accent. However, the Irish woman speaking in the tape pronounced it as /taɪn/. (...) When all these factors are taken into account, the reason behind the low level of success becomes clear. All in all, it is ascertained from the current study that “greater familiarity with an English accent increases overall listening comprehension” (White et al., 2016, p. 7). It is evidently clear that people from different nationalities may tend to pronounce some words differently. The listeners actually knew the word but they could not recognize it when they were being tested. [...] Various listening texts including different accents and nationalities in language classrooms would help learners be aware of these distinctions. The students should be more aware of different Englishes spoken all around the world, as well as different dialects and accents (Kağıtçı Yıldız, p. 2017). However, the current education system in most of the language classrooms does not seem to have any concerns about this issue, especially for listening activities. (p. 1389)

Huber’s (2022) final remarks then are of interest to our research, as he offers suggestions towards the creation of more pluricentric-oriented textbooks. These are goalposts against which we may assess the performance of the selected material. Some points of special interest to us are:

- Greater linguistic variety is necessary in the reading and listening comprehension tasks, pointing towards a balanced, cross-regional representation in the receptive skills.
- The communicative scope of the foreign language taught should be maximised by regularly presenting a wide range of standard varieties.

- Pluricentricity should be presented in as diverse ways as possible, covering a wide variety of topics.
- After a neutral beginner level, non-dominant varieties should gradually gain more and more ground.

## **Methodology**

### **Data analysis tools**

Following the framework for bias proposed by Sadker and Zittlerman, there are aspects of accent bias that would be better addressed through quantitative methods whereas others would be better explored through qualitative methods.

In the case of Invisibility, we explored:

- the proportion of the listening audios in the EFL textbooks that feature non-RP native British speakers,
- the degree to which broad or neutralised varieties are featured,
- the correspondence between putative origin of speakers and the phonological features they display.

Whenever possible, we aimed to identify the exposure provided for the different British accents, as identified by certain phonological markers. These aspects of bias call for a quantitative analysis.

On the other hand, other aspects of bias call for a more qualitative approach:

- In the case of Fragmentation, we aim to explore whether the varieties included are depicted in geographically marked contexts or if they can be encountered in a variety of linguistic contexts.
- In the case of Stereotyping, we aim to explore whether non-RP speakers are portrayed in ways that reproduce prejudice. Therefore we tracked

whether non-RP speakers are cast in expert roles or non-expert roles in interactions or monologues, and whether they appear as “neutral” narrators in texts.

Through the analysis of these variables, we tried to gain insight on the level of Unreality in the portrayal of British English accents in the EFL textbooks analysed.

### **Accent description and markers**

Following the accent descriptions in Collins and Mees (2013), we designed a comparative chart of the different phonological features of accent varieties. Based on it, we decided to use some of these features as markers of accent variety, because their phonemic realization contrasts with the RP realization in a number of accents, and therefore can reliably be used to identify non-RP varieties.

Accent markers selected include:

- CONSONANTS
  - rhoticity and /r/ realisation
  - th-fronting and th-stopping
  - glottalisation
  - h-dropping
- VOWEL SOUNDS
  - BATH/TRAP replacement
  - STRUT phonemic status and allophonic realisations (quality: e.g.:if similar to FOOT)

- PRICE, FACE and GOAT: vocalic glide vs steady vowel, as well as quality
- MOUTH quality

There are other markers that can be considered for the identification of specific accents, both at the level of individual sounds (e.g. /x/ phoneme in Scottish English) and suprasegmental level (yod coalescence in stressed syllables in EE, or a prevalence of rising intonation patterns).

### **Data collection tools**

As stated before, it is our concern to gauge accent bias in EFL coursebooks as a general tendency, across different CEFR levels, and in different publishing houses. Therefore, four courses from different editorials were selected for the analysis:

- Solutions (3rd edition) by Oxford University Press (elementary, pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate)
- Gold Experience (2nd edition) by Pearson (A2, B1, B2)
- Gateway 2nd edition / Gateway to the world by Macmillan (A1+, B1, B2)
- Achievers by Richmond (A1+, B1, B2)

These materials were selected because they are coursebooks targeted toward teenagers, they encompass the different levels proposed by CEFR, they are available in Argentina, they require similar contact hours for classroom application, and they have been published within the last decade.

We chose a unit from each textbook so that it would be possible to assess the audios in textbooks of the same level that address similar topics. Our intention in doing so is to reduce variables so that the differences that arise in the different coursebook series can be ascribed to their pedagogical approach rather than constraints emerging from linguistic or subject-matter characteristics.

We compared and contrasted the coursebooks and selected the most similar units for each level. The units selected for the Elementary/A1+-A2 level address holidays and travelling. The units selected for the Pre-intermediate/B1 level address environmental issues. Finally, the units selected for the Upper-intermediate/B2 level address social issues. Another reason that weighed in our choice was that the topics selected created opportunities to deal with different geographic areas and thus, provide opportunities for speakers of a variety of origins to arise in a realistic manner.

## Discussion

All in all, quantitatively British non-RP accents are underrepresented (see chart 1). Some books outright did not feature any non-RP speakers at all. This is the case for Solutions Elementary and Gateway to the World B2.

In comparison to non-native and GA speakers, there is a slightly higher representation of British native speakers with an accent other than RP. However, every two speakers displaying any of the markers we selected for non-RP British accents, there was one speaker using RP even though it did not make sense for them to do so (see non-correspondence).

| -                  | Solutions | Gold Exp | Gateway | Achievers | total  | %      |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|---------|-----------|--------|--------|
| total speakers     | 162       | 111      | 97      | 120       | 490    | -      |
| RP                 | 146       | 89       | 92      | 93        | 420    | 85,71% |
| British NON-RP     | 7         | 10       | 4       | 11        | 32     | 6,53%  |
| NON-Brit natives   | 9         | 4        | 1       | 4         | 18     | 3,67%  |
| non-native         | 0         | 8        | 0       | 12        | 20     | 4,08%  |
| non-correspondence | 9         | 1        | 3       | 2         | 15     | 3,06%  |
| overall non-RP     |           |          |         |           |        |        |
| per coursebook     | 9,88%     | 19,82%   | 5,15%   | 22,50%    | 14,29% | -      |

Chart 1- Number of speakers according to origin in relation to coursebook lines, and percentages of added totals

For instance, in Solutions Elementary, there is an audio in which a Colombian runner living in New York is interviewed in regards to the New York

Marathon. Both the interviewer and the woman speak RP, instead of GA, or, in the case of the runner, a non-native, Spanish accent. Moreover, in Gold Experience A2, a boy whose origin was Welsh with Argentinian parents also spoke RP. Some of the features regarding the Welsh accent would also be expected in speakers whose L1 is Spanish (such as clear L in all positions, H-dropping and tap R), but none of these were present, whatsoever. The boy had an RP accent.

Another interesting finding was that British non-RP speakers were not equally represented in student's books and workbooks. There is a higher representation overall in the workbooks than in the student's books. Even though there is a slightly higher representation of non-RP accents in general (non-native, native non-British and British non-RP considered together) in student books rather than workbooks, there are proportionally more British non-RP speakers in workbooks, specially in the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. Some books in which this was true specifically were Gold Experience A2, Achievers A1+, Solutions Pre-Intermediate, Achievers B1, Solutions Upper-Intermediate, and Gold Experience B2. There are coursebooks in which, for the selected units, there were more British non-RP speakers in the students books rather than the workbooks, but there seems to be a general tendency worthy of our attention in the distribution pattern aforementioned (see chart 2).

| A1-A2/Elementary level |        |        |        |        |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| -                      | SB     | %      | WB     | %      |
| total speakers         | 158    | -      | 71     | -      |
| RP                     | 141    | 89,24% | 65     | 91,55% |
| British NON-RP         | 8      | 5,06%  | 4      | 5,63%  |
| Non-British natives    | 4      | 2,53%  | 2      | 2,82%  |
| Non-native             | 4      | 2,53%  | 0      | 0,00%  |
| non correspondence     | 4      | 2,53%  | 3      | 4,23%  |
| overall non-RP         | 10,13% | -      | 8,45%  | -      |
| B1/Pre-Intermediate    |        |        |        |        |
| -                      | SB     | %      | WB     | %      |
| total speakers         | 76     | -      | 40     | -      |
| RP                     | 59     | 77,63% | 34     | 85,00% |
| British NON-RP         | 6      | 7,89%  | 4      | 10,00% |
| Non-British natives    | 8      | 10,53% | 0      | 0,00%  |
| Non-native             | 5      | 6,58%  | 2      | 5,00%  |
| non correspondence     | 2      | 2,63%  | 2      | 5,00%  |
| overall non-RP         | 25,00% | -      | 15,00% | -      |
| B2/Upper intermediate  |        |        |        |        |
| -                      | SB     | %      | WB     | %      |
| total speakers         | 83     | -      | 62     | -      |
| RP                     | 68     | 81,93% | 43     | 69,35% |
| British NON-RP         | 5      | 6,02%  | 6      | 9,68%  |
| Non-British natives    | 4      | 4,82%  | 1      | 1,61%  |
| Non-native             | 6      | 7,23%  | 3      | 4,84%  |
| non correspondence     | 2      | 2,41%  | 2      | 3,23%  |
| overall non-rp         | 18,07% | -      | 16,13% | -      |

Chart 2- SB/WB distribution speakers of different origins according to CEFR level.

Further observation can be made as regards the representation of British non-RP speakers in EFL coursebooks. When looking at the speakers in non-interactional roles, such as narrator, grammar cue or pronunciation model, we find that 97,7% of them are RP. There is a 2,3% that are British non-RP, but considering that there is an overall 3% of non-correspondence between putative origin and RP accent, those few instances of non-RP speakers in these roles is negligible.



There is marked variation in the degree of representation across the different coursebook lines created by the different publishing houses (see chart 3), but this variation rarely, if ever, seems to follow a principle of gradual introduction, that is to say, featuring greater variability as the CEFR level increases.

| -                  | Solutions | Gold Exp | Gateway | Achievers |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|---------|-----------|
| total speakers     | %         | %        | %       | %         |
| RP                 | 90,12%    | 80,18%   | 94,85%  | 77,50%    |
| British NON-RP     | 4,32%     | 9,01%    | 4,12%   | 9,17%     |
| NON-Brit natives   | 5,56%     | 3,60%    | 1,03%   | 3,33%     |
| non-native         | 0,00%     | 7,21%    | 0,00%   | 10,00%    |
| non-correspondence | 5,56%     | 0,90%    | 3,09%   | 1,67%     |

Chart 3- percentage of speakers of different origin in relation to coursebook lines.

In the case of Gateway, by Macmillan, there are the fewest total speakers (97) in the highest proportion of RP speakers (95%) and the lowest overall British non-RP representation (4%). This line does not feature non-native speakers. There is one British non-RP speaker in the A1+ level, three in the B1 level, and none in the B2 level. However, in the latter, in a pronunciation model, there is a pronunciation feature in a word only that corresponds with a British non-RP accent (STRUT vowel sound replaced by FOOT vowel sound in “destruction”). As there are no other accompanying instances to support the claim that this was a non-RP speaker, we chose not to label this speaker as having a British non-RP accent.



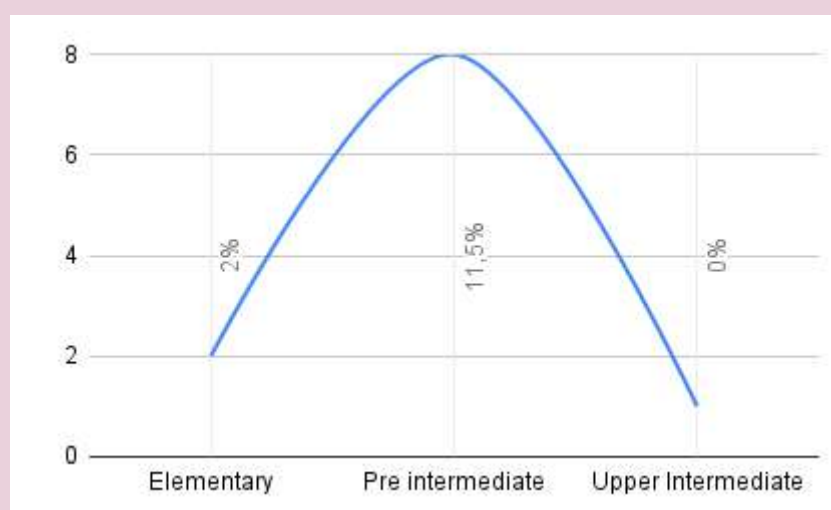


Fig. 1- percentage of non-RP speakers and number of phonological markers across levels in Gateway coursebooks

In the case of Solutions, by Oxford University Press, we observe one of the highest proportion of RP speakers (90%) in correlation to the highest rate of non-correspondence (5,5%), which can be interpreted as a tendency to include speakers of different origins but ascribing an RP accent to them. There is no representation whatsoever of non-native speakers, and there is a higher number of non-British natives (5,5% all GA) than British non-RP speakers (4,3%).

Solutions is the coursebook line with the most speakers overall (162). However, it displays one of the lowest rates of representation of non-RP accents (4,3%), with only 16 instances across the three levels analysed. However small the representation is in numbers, the pattern in which the British non-RP speakers is presented follows to an extent the principle of gradual introduction:

- There is an increase in the amount of non-RP phonological features displayed as the level is higher.
- In spite of that, the level which presents the most British non-RP speakers is Pre-Intermediate, followed by the Upper-Intermediate level.

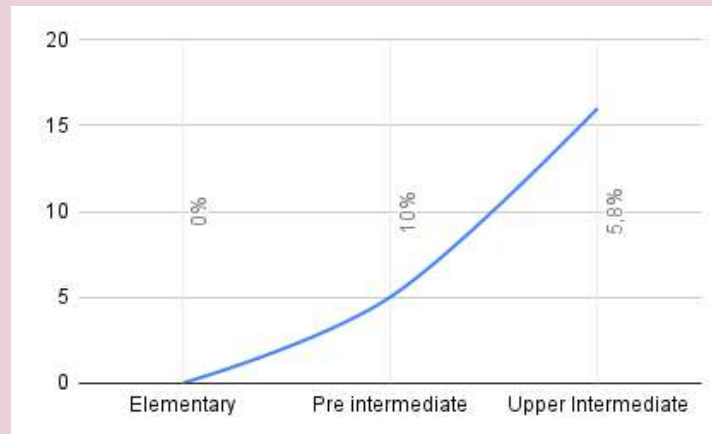


Fig. 2- percentage of non-RP speakers and number of phonological markers across levels in Solutions coursebooks

In the Gold Experience line, by Pearson, out of 111 speakers, only 9% are British non-RP speakers, alongside an additional 10% of non-RP representation, composed by GA speakers and non-natives in the roles of students doing exam tasks; the remaining 80% of speakers being RP.

As regards the principle of gradual introduction, if we disregard the B1 level—which features only 1 British non-RP speaker—when comparing the A2 and the B2 level, there seems to be some adherence to the principle of gradual introduction: not only is there a greater proportion of British non-RP speakers in the latter but also a bigger number of phonological markers.

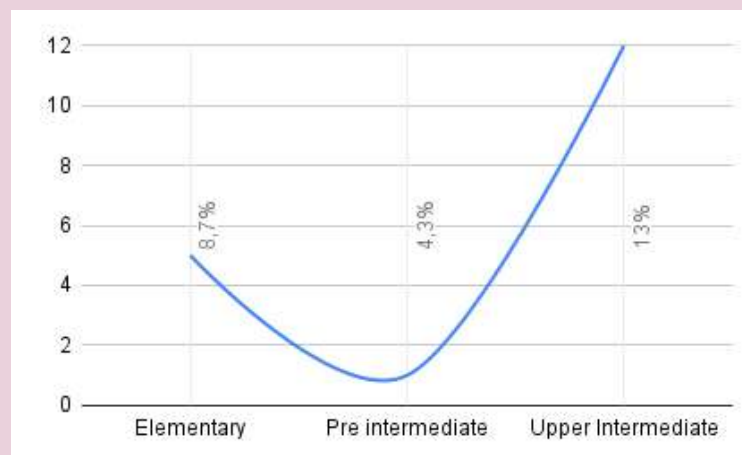


Fig. 3- percentage of non-RP speakers and number of phonological markers across levels in Gold Experience coursebooks.

In the case of Achievers, by Richmond, there are 120 speakers, and it features the lowest proportion of RP speakers among the coursebook lines analysed (77,5%). The non-RP representation (22,5%) is made up of non-natives (10%), British non-RP speakers (9% ) and GA (3,5%). Rather than a gradual introduction, there is a steady representation of British non-RP accents as regards both the number of speakers and pronunciation features across levels.

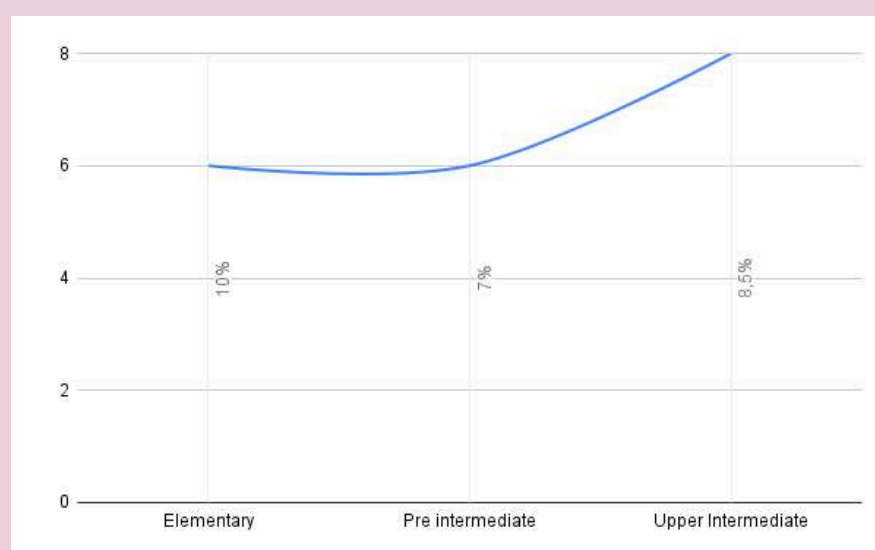


Fig. 4- percentage of non-RP speakers and number of phonological markers across levels in Achievers coursebooks

In qualitative terms, we analysed both speaker status and the degree of neutralisation of their accents. As regards the status of speakers in interaction exchanges, we found that RP speakers are not represented in the same proportions as British non-RP speakers, but not in ways that we had initially expected. While a quarter of RP speakers are depicted in expert roles, a third of British non-RP speakers are cast in expert roles.

| -            | British non-RP roles |     |     |           |    |    |                 |    |    |         |    |    |       |
|--------------|----------------------|-----|-----|-----------|----|----|-----------------|----|----|---------|----|----|-------|
|              | Solutions            |     |     | Achievers |    |    | Gold Experience |    |    | Gateway |    |    | total |
|              | e.                   | p-i | u-i | A1+       | B1 | B2 | A2              | B1 | B2 | A1+     | B1 | B2 |       |
| narrator/cue | 0                    | 0   | 0   | 1         | 0  | 1  | 1               | 0  | 0  | 0       | 0  | 0  | 3     |
| expert       | 0                    | 0   | 1   | 1         | 0  | 2  | 1               | 1  | 2  | 0       | 1  | 0  | 9     |
| non-expert   | 0                    | 4   | 2   | 3         | 2  | 1  | 3               | 0  | 2  | 1       | 0  | 0  | 18    |
| total        | 0                    | 4   | 3   | 5         | 2  | 4  | 5               | 1  | 4  | 1       | 1  | 0  | 30    |
| -            | RP roles             |     |     |           |    |    |                 |    |    |         |    |    |       |
|              | Solutions            |     |     | Achievers |    |    | Gold Experience |    |    | Gateway |    |    | total |
|              | e.                   | p-i | u-i | A1+       | B1 | B2 | A2              | B1 | B2 | A1+     | B1 | B2 |       |
| narrator/cue | 12                   | 2   | 20  | 11        | 7  | 21 | 19              | 8  | 3  | 6       | 6  | 11 | 126   |
| expert       | 11                   | 11  | 13  | 1         | 1  | 6  | 2               | 5  | 2  | 8       | 2  | 3  | 65    |
| non-expert   | 47                   | 17  | 13  | 25        | 12 | 9  | 28              | 5  | 17 | 39      | 15 | 2  | 229   |
| total        | 70                   | 30  | 46  | 37        | 20 | 36 | 49              | 18 | 22 | 53      | 23 | 16 | 420   |

Chart 4- Speaker roles according to accent for RP and British non-RP speakers

It is worth mentioning that the representation of British non-RP accents found in all coursebooks is that of neutralised accents. The various markers we had selected to identify non-RP accents were not represented in similar proportions. Taking into account the number and distribution of the instances of markers identified:

It is worth mentioning that the representation of British non-RP accents found in all coursebooks is that of neutralised accents. The various markers we had selected to identify non-RP accents were not represented in similar proportions. Taking into account the number and distribution of the instances of markers identified:

- Some markers were consistently represented:
  - STRUT represented 23% of all instances of markers identified.
  - Glottalisation represented 21,5% of all instances of markers identified.
  - Rising Intonation represented 14% of all instances of markers identified.

- Some markers were present as isolated examples:
  - Rhoticity and r-realisation represented 8,5% of all instances.
  - L-vocalisation represented 5,7% of all instances.
  - FACE represented 5,7% of all instances
- Some markers were heavily underrepresented or not present at all:
  - Yod-coalescence and MOUTH represented 4,5% and appeared in two out of the twelve coursebooks analysed, each.
  - BATH-TRAP replacement represented 2,8% and appeared only twice in the coursebooks analysed: once in Achievers B1 and once in Gateway B1.
  - PRICE represented 2,8% and appeared in only one coursebook analysed: Solutions Upper Intermediate
  - Th-stopping, h-dropping, t-voicing, GOAT, KIT opening, GOOSE fronting and FLEECE merger appear only once each in all the coursebooks analysed.
  - Th-fronting does not appear at all across the twelve books analysed.

Out of the 32 speakers labelled as British non-RP, there are only 9 speakers who can be identified as having a specific accent whereas the remaining 23 display only one non-RP pronunciation marker and therefore could not be reliably labelled with any specific accent. Out of the 9 identified speakers, 3 speakers feature Estuary English, both North and West Country were spoken by 2 speakers each, and the Republic of Ireland accent and Scottish accent are featured by 1 speaker each.

Some accent variations which should have big representation population-wise, such as West and East Midlands (16% of British population), East Anglia (9%) and Liverpool (7,5%), are not found in the coursebook units analysed. Other regional accents with a smaller population which are not

represented either are Welsh (4,5%), Geordie (4%) and Northern Irish (2,75%). MLA (Multicultural London English) is not represented either.

## **Conclusions**

Following the framework for bias proposed by Sadker and Zittlerman (2007), there are aspects of accent bias that were confirmed by our research. There is an important degree of Invisibility and Fragmentation in the depiction of non-RP standard varieties and an overall Unreal portrayal of the accents and their variability.

In the case of Fragmentation, we could not confirm a correspondence between non-RP speakers and topics. The vast majority of them had an unspecified origin, and the topic they discussed—one out of three of them as experts—was not necessarily connected to their place of origin. It is worth noticing, though, that in many of the cases in which we did identify a specific accent, there were explicit mentions of region (such as a Scottish speaker talking about the Scottish referendum or Mark O'Hara, the Irish speaker with a conspicuous Irish surname).

Nevertheless, we found Fragmentation as regards the distribution of these speakers in the coursebook material. There is an overall tendency to a higher representation of British non-RP speakers in workbook material. As the workbook material is less likely to be covered by students in the classroom, it therefore might be disregarded by both students and teachers, which points to de-prioritisation of regional accents. Students then, are bound to miss out on the few chances provided by coursebooks to be exposed to non-dominant varieties. The hegemony of RP in the coursebook material construes British non-RP varieties as bonuses for the dutiful student who completes all of their homework. This implies a relegation of British non-RP varieties to audios that students will probably listen to on their own, without their teacher's guidance.

In turn, this creates fewer opportunities to make the British non-RP input salient, and therefore available for noticing and processing. Additionally, as Buyukahiska and Uyar (2019) point out, students are less likely to succeed in listening tasks featuring accents they are not familiar with; consequently, the dutiful student who does take advantage of the chance to listen to variety (framed as practice at home) may fail to complete these tasks and become negatively predisposed to non-RP accents.

As regards Invisibility, we would like to highlight that even though we expected to find RP represented in higher percentages than the actual RP speaker population in the UK can account for, we were surprised to find that some books did not feature speakers other than RP, regardless of the CEFR level. The erasure of not only non-native speakers, and native speakers from other countries, but also of vast swaths of British speakers, reaffirms the dominant status of RP as the monolithic “British accent” and the desirable variety for EFL settings to reproduce and aspire to. The prevalence of RP as the dominant inner circle variety is true to the point that in some coursebooks there are more speakers using RP in spite of their putative origins (non dominant inner circle or expanding circle), than speakers who are British non-RP (and actually display inner circle non-dominant features.)

We cannot fail to mention, as regards Invisibility, that some of the British varieties with the least prestige, such as the Midlands accent and the Scouse accent, were the ones that were not represented at all in the coursebook material we analysed, in direct correlation to the ideologised values of British accents discussed by Bishop and Coupland (2007). Similarly, the varieties that are included in the coursebooks are those which enjoy a greater prestige or social attractiveness, such as London and southern varieties or GA, or speaker pride, such as Northern English and the Celtic varieties.

Additionally, the phonological markers that were underrepresented or absent are precisely also those which carry a negative social connotation, such as th-fronting. The absence of broad accents and the generalised neutralisation of British non-RP accents seem to reproduce the social pressure that speakers face to hide their regional origins to gain social upward mobility, as described by Baratta and Halenko (2022).

The British non-RP speakers in the coursebooks might be prominently depicted as experts, but they do so at the cost of masking their regional identity, just as real life speakers. In many cases, the coursebook speakers used the phonological markers inconsistently, or used a single marker of a non-RP accent and not others that are expected to co-occur with them. For example, in *Solutions Upper-Intermediate* there is a speaker, identified as Charlotte from Bristol, who displays some features of a West Country accent such as rhoticity and GOOSE fronting but did not produce the expected allophones in PRICE ("my mind") and MOUTH ("thousand"), using the RP allophone instead. She did not use glottalisation or th-stopping either, which are also expected features of a West Country accent.

In *Gold Experience* there are some instances of vox pops, in which real people are interviewed (all of which spoke in an RP accent). This drew our attention to delivery in the voice acting in other audios. In many instances, the topic of the lesson justified the presence of non-RP speakers, but the actors put on an RP accent (e.g. a reporter in New York with RP accent or two RP speakers discussing living in Brighton). In other cases, it was noticeable that the actors were putting on accents with various degrees of success, not only for the British non-RP accents, as described before, but for GA and non-natives as well. As Spanish L1 speakers ourselves, we found it especially jarring how non-natives sounded, in many cases displaying features that do not make sense as transfer from our native language. This was also true for



GA, as we identified many instances in which markers such as rhoticity and R-colouring were present, but the RP vowel system was used, including the LOT vowel and marked length contrast, both of which are absent in GA. In other cases, we could identify a single instance of a marker in a listening text, in what we could only interpret as a slip of the voice actor aiming to do RP. These observations are similar to those made by Sherman (2010), who finds that all speakers are made to use the dominant inner circle variety (in their case, GA), with the concession of sometimes putting “an accent” in their delivery.

Be it as regards the proportion of speakers, or their phonological features and their distribution, there is a high level of Unreality in the portrayal of British English accents in the EFL textbooks analysed. If we assess our findings against Huber’s (2022) goalposts, we can conclude that:

There is indeed, quantitatively, a need for greater linguistic variety in the audio materials, in a more balanced, cross-regional representation.

There is not a clear, gradual introduction of non-dominant varieties, which will imply a greater commitment to showcase not only a bigger number of non-RP speakers as the CEFR levels progress, but also a wider variety of phonological features associated with the different varieties.

There is a narrow communicative scope, in that for language reception more instances of variety are necessary, as there are only scarce instances of non-RP speakers, practically all of them in interactional exchanges. But also, there is a narrow communicative scope in that models for production and imitation—that is, language presented outside of interactional exchanges—are only presented in RP, not opening up opportunities for international intelligibility to be discussed.

As for the teaching implications of our research, even though the different lines of coursebooks display varied degrees of accent bias, in all cases we would recommend to supplement the listening materials with real life input (such as songs, vox pops, interviews with famous people and so on) to give students greater exposure to variety. Additionally, it is recommended not to relegate the instances of non-RP accents found in the coursebooks to practice outside of the classroom.

On the one hand, it is of paramount importance for language reception to broaden the students' horizons. Teachers should not expect students to adopt a Scouse or a Brummie accent but making them explicitly aware of their existence and the differences in realization with the RP accent they heard in coursebooks will foster further, and more real, aural comprehension.

On the other, it is recommended to adopt the perspective of international intelligibility for language production (Walker, 2021), in order to raise awareness of language accent variability. With the rise of English as a lingua franca, the status of native accents as the goal for pronunciation is put into question. Instead, the international community should aim for intelligibility, which implies a different set of goals. Vowel length, rather than quality, the consonant inventory (except for the dental fricatives), consonant clusters and nuclear stress make up a lingua franca core. If we let go of a fossilised RP as a model, we could set more realistic goals, and ask ourselves: Is there a need to force Spanish-speaking students into a non-rhotic accent? Or to produce a centralised STRUT instead of a back one, as suggested by the spelling, and as it is indeed, produced by many native speakers? Or insist they produce a BATH/TRAP split, when many native speakers produce a merger, rhyming chance with can? In order to avoid a negative consonant conflation (/s/ in place of /θ/), is it not better to present TH-stopping or TH-fronting as possible allophones?

Additionally, teachers, who act as pronunciation models for their students, should probably follow Upton's advice and embrace a more modern, pluricentric approach to pronunciation and move away from conservative textbook RP in order to better represent real speech, and prepare students for real intercultural communication.

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