

Addressing accent in the Teachers' Standards

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Briefing Note
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In Summary

1. The Teachers' Standards require teachers to use and promote Standard English in the classroom, a variety which can be spoken in any accent.
2. However, there is clear evidence that broad varieties of regional UK accents are disfavoured in teaching training (eg, glottal stops are proscribed).
3. This applies even to teachers who are teaching in their home region.
4. Those from the North and Midlands are being told to adopt southern pronunciation in words such as *bath* and *bus*, for phonics teaching.
5. Trainee teachers would benefit from guidance on the topic of accent, notably in terms of what the accent standards should be, as they do not currently exist.
6. However, it appears that mentors have de facto accent standards in mind, though deciding on such standards needs to be part of a joint discussion.

In Detail

1. Background – The Teachers' Standards

The [Teachers' Standards](#) provide detail on what is expected of teachers regarding subject knowledge, professional responsibilities and conduct. In terms of linguistic standards, Section Three sets out the following:

“demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject”

While people's accents will change, the grammar and lexis – which is the basis for Standard English – will not.

In the absence of a 'standard accent' in the UK, all accents should, according to the standards, be acceptable.

However, the inclusion of the word 'articulacy' can be used to [judge teachers' accents, notably within training contexts](#), and thus be a means to justify directing teachers to reduce their accents.

This is [not to suggest a linguistic conspiracy, nor to ignore the need for teachers to be understood by their students](#). Rather, it points to what is purely a practical issue – **who decides what is or is not 'articulate' in terms of teachers' accents?**

2. A preference for more 'general' varieties of UK accents within teaching

Variety within regional accents can be categorised as *neutral*, *general* and *broad*, part of what I refer to as a Trichotomy of UK accents, with broad varieties being those that tend to be targeted by mentors as needing reduction.

Broad varieties of regional UK accents are those that employ sounds, which I refer to as [phonological giveaways](#). These are sounds which mark the accent – and speaker – as being from the local area.

Neutral varieties, however, are those which remove the more local sounds and thus, it takes more time to determine the speaker's region of origin. This in turn allows for [negative stereotypes](#) associated with said region to be reduced in the process, notably tied to [class-based assumptions](#).

General accents are those which retain more regional flavour, but not to the extent of being too regional. This might be seen as a happy medium for British society, reflective of social mobility and an accent that is neither too 'posh' nor too 'common'. There is evidence that [Estuary English](#) is an accent that captures this general variety, based on a combination of features from [RP \(Received Pronunciation\)](#) and Cockney.

There are several potential issues that emanate from this:

- In the UK, [negative perceptions still exist toward broad regional accents in particular](#); what might the implications be for trainee and established teachers with these accents?
- Teachers, notably phonics teachers, need to be understood by their students; if broad accents are a potential stumbling block to this, might it be legitimate to ask teachers to modify their accent in some way (if not expect them to self-modify)?
- On the other hand, is it reasonable for teachers to display their otherwise unmodified accents for the students as a means to reflect the linguistic diversity which exists outside the classroom?

We can see how [these issues play out in real life](#). Examples of specific comments made by mentors and senior staff:

- A secondary school art teacher from London was told by her mentor that her accent was 'unprofessional', and he told her to write the word 'water' with a capital T (in order for her not to omit this sound from her speech).

- A teacher from Rossendale, Lancashire was told by an interviewer that unless he modified his accent, his interview for a PGCE programme would be stopped.
- Two Mancunian teachers were both told to reduce their accents, with this reduction made a 'target' for subsequent observed teaching whilst in training.

Teachers have expressed their frustration, even sadness, that students are not being exposed to diversity, especially since this is a key aspect of their teaching in the first instance. **Against a societal backdrop of respect for diversity and equality, might we consider this from the perspective of an area that has otherwise been overlooked within teaching – accent?**

3. Teachers who remain in their home region for post-training teaching

Even for teachers who are planning to remain in their home region for teaching, there is still the directive made by mentors to reduce their accents. This again suggests that there is a preference for accents which, while regional, do not sound *too* regional – thus, a move to general or neutral varieties. However, this is misguided for several reasons.

- As mentioned, students, regardless of their first language, need to be prepared for the linguistic reality that exists outside the school gates, and the classroom is the place to start such preparation.
- Teachers with broad accents can send the message to students from a young age that their accent is not a barrier to career success.
- A more general accent, while perhaps more understandable – initially – for those outside the immediate area, is not 'better' than other varieties.

The implication is that, even with the use of Standard English, students' broad accents, and those of the teacher, are a deficit.

- While there is still accent-based prejudice within certain careers, the key is not to train students to reduce their regional accent, but to create a society in which such accents are accepted, [including in the world of work](#).
- Finally, **this ties in with ongoing class-based issues in the UK, which won't be effectively addressed if we opt for a more one size fits all standard to teachers' accents.**

4. Phonics standards for UK teachers

From my research, it is clear that teachers from outside the south of England are expected to use southern pronunciation in words such as *bath* and *bus*.

A Midlands teacher was told by her mentor during training, in front of the entire group, that if she could not adopt southern pronunciation, it was "best to go back to where you come from".

Such directives, blunt or tactful, share the same purpose: to make clear that northern and Midlands speech, united in words such as *bath* and *bus* in terms of pronunciation, are not the 'standard' in the context of teaching phonics in the South.

Therefore, the **Teachers' linguistic Standards need to be longer than just a sentence, and incorporate a new section focused entirely on accent standards for phonics teaching.**

5. Recommendations – A need for overall accent-based guidance in the Teachers' Standards

I seek to provide accent-based directives for the context of the Teachers' Standards, which can then be used within training contexts and beyond.

Currently, they don't exist and this can lead to a lack of clarity for teachers and mentors.

Only by having a joint discussion on this matter can we expect to determine how accent can be addressed as part of the Teachers' Standards.

Clarifying accent standards for UK teaching cannot be done unless it is part of a joint discussion, that which takes in the views of all relevant individuals – mentors, teachers and perhaps even primary and secondary students themselves.

OFSTED could lead the way by conducting a national survey that takes in mentors' and teachers' views on this matter. Following the survey, adding to existing policy could lead to linguistic clarity regarding accent. We cannot legislate for linguistic prejudice, but we can legislate for accent fairness.

The key issue, however, is equality, incorporating all voices, to include those of the teachers themselves, especially those with broad accents in particular. Accent can be a complicated issue, certainly in terms of determining what exactly we want to make official in terms of accent standards. But for teachers, being equipped with specific guidance in terms of expected pronunciation, and having contributed to it, can have the effect of making their voices – quite literally – valued.

It is important to remember that accent is not merely about a series of sounds; rather, like all aspects of human language, it is a [signifier for larger categories, such as race and class.](#)

And class is suggested to be the elephant in the room that people are reluctant to discuss, but a topic that nonetheless needs to be discussed and will inevitably come up in a discussion of accent in teaching. It is clear from my work that many teachers with broad accents – those deemed to be working-class – are those who believe that it is their class background which is being raised as an issue, with their accent a proxy for class. As one teacher tellingly said, ‘I can teach just as well as someone who speaks posher.....there’s nothing wrong with my intellect’.

Author



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