UCL

Decolonising phonetics and phonology in clinical practice: horizon scanning of multilingualism in phonetics teaching across UK SLT programmes.

Davide Di Prete

Andrew Nevins

Maria Garraffa

Centre for Equality Research in Brain Sciences (the ERB Centre)
Annual Seminar – 4 June 2025

Roadmap

1. Intro

2. Background

3. Aims and Methodology

4. Preliminary findings

5. Output

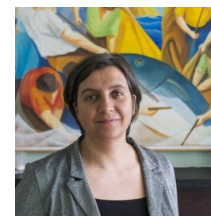References

Meet the team

Andrew Nevins (PI)

Language Sciences, UCL. He has published together with over one hundred coauthors from over twenty different countries.

Davide Di Prete (Co-I)

PhD candidate at UCL in Phonology (Linguistics). He is a Demonstrator for the Speech and Language Therapy MSc.

Maria Garraffa

Associate Professor at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at UEA. She works on minority languages and diversity.

Background - the need to decolonise

The ERB Centre:

*"At the core of our work is the belief that EDI research is a **key contributor** to the improvement of neuroscientific research content and culture, as well as **physical and mental** health outcomes for all."*

Grand Challenge of Cultural Understanding:

Many UCL academics guide their research practice with principles and values that fall within a **decolonising framework**, including practices that centre on co-production, relationship building, capacity development, equitable participation in research, and **promoting intersectionality** in research.

Background - the need to decolonise

Decolonising methodologies are being recognised as essential to good research practice both within and outside higher education.

Cultures of Decolonisation at UCL:

Calls for research to be decolonised are premised on the argument that, to be able to address the challenges of a **global society**, research needs to take into account the diverse social, cultural, and historical experiences of **different populations** around the world […] Initiatives to decolonise research aim to address questions of **equity, representation, relevance, capacity, and ethics** in the intertwined processes of research and knowledge production.

Simon Eten Angyagre and Ysabel Hannam (2022). Cultures of Decolonisation at UCL. UCL's Grand Challenge of Cultural Understanding Working Group, London, UK.

Background - the experience of SLT practice in the UK

"Sometimes, you can pick up speech sound disorder in home language. [...] [T]eachers would think 'Oh they can't produce the "W" instead of the "wuh", like the "V". And really, it's just an accent thing. [...] it's not speech sound difficulties, it's just knowing that culturally the "W" sound doesn't exist". (Neha)

Gréaux et al. (2024) shows that

[participants] were largely in favour of **novel education approaches** in speech and language therapy that move away from rigid conceptualisations of 'competency' to promote **person-centredness**, reflexivity, self-growth and ongoing professional development.

Gréaux M, Gibson JL, Katsos N. (2024): "It's not just linguistically, there's much more going on: The experiences and practices of bilingual paediatric speech and language therapists in the UK." in Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2024 Sep-Oct;59(5):1715-1733. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.13027.

Background - the experience of SLT practice in the UK

SLTs who speak more than one language often face unique challenges in the profession. Many feel pressure to speak perfect English and other are not feeling confident of their training. (Gréaux et al., 2024)

We believe being multilingual should be seen as a **strength in the profession**. Multilingual SLTs can understand clients' needs in a more personal and culturally sensitive way, and they have the linguistic competence to address assessing and planning for intervention in multilingual clients.

Background - the experience of SLT practice in other countries

*"The speech sciences programme at our institution is designed around a multilingual practice. We are trained **in multilingual services**, cultural sensitivity, and effective caregiver interaction, enabling us to make a **positive impact** on the lives of Malaysia's diverse population."*

Fourth year students, Speech Sciences Programme, Faculty of Health Sciences, National University of Malaysia

The RCSLT Bulletin Autumn 2023, *"Focus on diversity. No language barrier"*, p. 19

Background - the SLT curriculum: RCSLT recommendation

Currently, the RCSLT guidance (2021) on SLT training includes **general recommendations** for teaching phonetics (e.g., the guidance outlines theoretical concepts and practical skills in phonetic analysis, covering articulatory description, perception, transcription, and production of sounds using the IPA chart).

However, these recommendations are broad, allowing accredited programmes across the UK to **shape their teaching in many ways**, based on the programme's duration, available funding, and number of students.
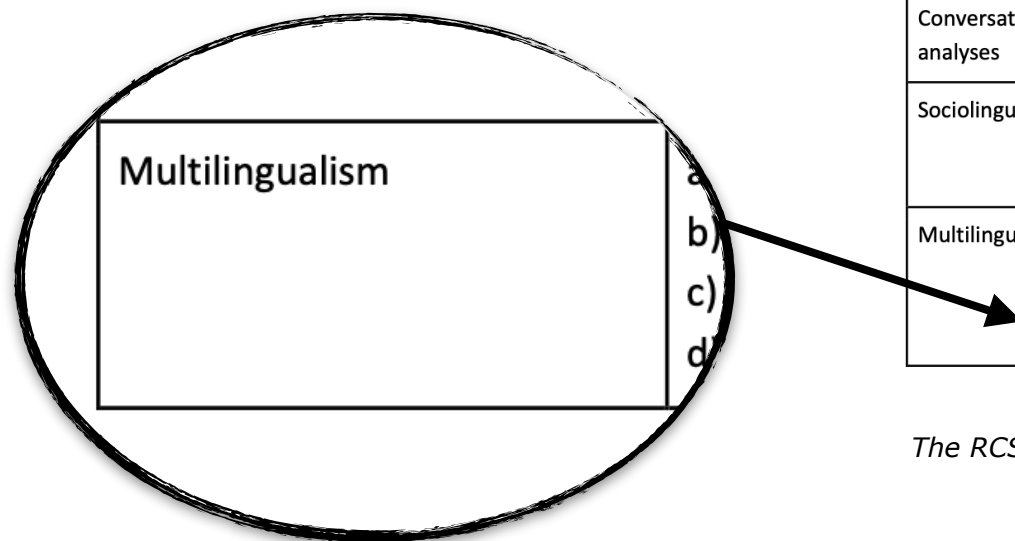
4.4.1   Phonetics and linguistics

Note: Development and consolidation of the skills in practical phonetics and linguistics, which underpin clinical practice, entails a considerable investment of time over an extended period, and may require high levels of small-group, face-to-face contact.

Content area	Indicative content: knowledge base required to enable achievement of graduate capabilities

Phonetics and clinical applications	a) Theoretical concepts and practical skills in phonetic analysis techniques, including:
	    1) Articulatory description, perception, transcription and production of sounds represented by the IPA chart and, as appropriate, by the extIPA chart
	    2) Phonetic analysis of voice quality and prosody
	    3) Clinical applications of practical phonetics
	b) Acoustic phonetics, including:
	    1) The nature of sound (waveforms, amplitude, frequency and duration)
	    2) Instrumentation and software for acoustic measurement
	c) Speech production, including instrumentation and software for measurement of speech and voice production
	d) Clinical application of perceptual and instrumental approaches to analysis of speech and voice production

General linguistics and clinical applications	a) Theoretical concepts in linguistics and their application to all language modalities
	b) Understand and apply principles of analysis of:
	    1) Phonology
	    2) Morphology
	    3) Syntax
	    4) Semantics
	    5) Pragmatics
	c) Clinical applications of linguistics in both typical and atypical development:

The RCSLT Curriculum guidance, March 2021, p.62

Background - the SLT curriculum: RCSLT recommendation

Whilst 'multilingualism' is present and highlighted as a **separate subject** in the RCSLT guidance, it is not linked to the teaching of phonetics or speech sounds, as well to any other linguistic components.

Speech and language acquisition and change over the lifespan	a) Semantic-pragmatic, syntactic and phonological acquisition, development and change b) Speech acquisition and typical articulatory development and change c) Acquisition of language in alternative modalities

Psycholinguistics	a) Current psycholinguistic frameworks and their clinical application
	   1) Comprehension of language
	   2) Expression of language
	   3) Speech production
	   4) Speech perception
	b) The extension of psycholinguistic models to other communicative modalities

Conversation and discourse analyses	a) Theoretical models and frameworks of conversation and discourse b) Current approaches to analysis in pragmatics, conversation and discourse
Sociolinguistics	a) Regional and social accents and dialects b) Gender- and age-related variation in speech and language c) Styles and registers
Multilingualism	a) Theoretical models of multilingualism b) Typical and atypical patterns of development in multilingualism from infancy to old age c) Additional language acquisition, speech production and perception d) Implications of multilingualism for assessment and intervention in speech and language therapy practice

The RCSLT Curriculum guidance, March 2021, p.63

Multilingualism

a
b)
c)
d

Aims -

We aim to:

- bridge the gap by **integrating** multilingualism into the theoretical study of linguistics, ensuring that inclusion and diversity are embedded in the foundational training of SLTs.

- develop recommendations for an inclusive, **decolonised curriculum** that integrates multilingualism and linguistic diversity into phonetics and phonology training.

- produce reports and guidelines for RCSLT and disseminate findings to **promote discussion** within the SLT community.

Methodology -

Qualitative approach	With guidance and inputs from our team of experts, the methodological approach for this research* is **qualitative**, consisting of: • a review of academic literature • two separate online surveys **and** a focus group

Online recruitment	Recruiting is taking place in all 18 SLT programmes approved by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT). Surveys are on Google Form with anonymised data. Focus Group to be done online on Microsoft Teams. Surveys were preceded by two pilot phases, one for teachers and one for students.

Methodology - 2 surveys

1. Teachers of phonetics and phonology	You **can** participate if: • You work in higher education in an institution accredited by RCSLT **and** • You are a teacher/professor/PGTA/convenor of phonetics and phonology modules in SLT courses across the UK.
2. Students of SLT courses	You **can** participate if: • You are in higher education in an institution accredited by RCSLT **and** • You are a student of HEIs pre-reg SLT/SLP programmes across the UK **and** • You have taken phonetics courses or are currently taking phonetics courses.

Methodology - Survey for teachers

SECTION 1 | DEMOGRAPHICS
SECTION 2 | CURRICULUM COVERAGE IN MULTILINGUALISM

In our survey of 'phonetics and phonology' we use *multilingualism* to refer to both the teaching of and awareness about different languages' sound systems, and how these **may intersect** with and influence the production and perception of speech sounds.

SECTION 3 | TEACHING PHONETICS AND EAR TRAINING
SECTION 4 | TEACHING PHONETIC ASSESSMENTS
SECTION 5 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS
SECTION 6 | FACULTY AND RESOURCES

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about multilingualism? *

	Definitely disagree	Mostly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly agree	Definitely agree	Not sure
I think multilingualism should be part of the phonetics module	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel prepared to teach different languages' sound systems in phonetics	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think my students feel prepared to assess and treat clients with non-English language background, based on the phonetics teaching they receive at my	○	○	○	○	○	○

Methodology - Survey for students

SECTION 1 | DEMOGRAPHICS
SECTION 2 | CURRICULUM COVERAGE IN MULTILINGUALISM

Feeling confident about a topic means: you understand it well, you can explain it in your own words, and you know how to apply it or recognise it in different situations.

Feeling confident about a practice means: you are comfortable doing it, you know when and how to use it, and you can apply it independently in real situations (for example, during placement or in professional work).

6. How confident do you feel about the following **topics**, based on your learning experience during the SLT course? *

	Not confident at all	Slightly confident	Moderately confident	Very confident	Extremely confident
Multiple Standard English varieties (e.g., General American, SSBE, Australian English, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Phonetic inventories for regional accents and dialect (e.g., Geordie, Cockney, Scouse, Brummie, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
World Englishes					

Methodology - Critical reflections

Multilingualism intersects with **several sensitive topics**, especially in clinical and educational contexts. Here is a list for you to reflect on whether they are discussed in your teaching, and how.

SECTION | CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

For each statement or topic, respond using the scale provided to indicate whether it has been discussed in the classroom, how it emerged (raised by the students and/or formally taught), and add a short comment, if applicable.

Methodology - Critical reflections

Sections

- Standard vs. Non-Standard Varieties
- Language Ideologies and Assumptions
- Colonialism and Linguistic Identity
- Language Policy and Integration
- Other Communication Modalities

Examples

"The idea of standard English can be contentious, as it marginalises regional and non-standard varieties"
"Certain languages or language groups are associated with lower standard (e.g., vocal fry in America)"
"The power imbalance between dominant and minority languages"
"Multilingualism as a 'barrier' to communication"
"Marginalisation of sign languages in speech-focused professions"

Preliminary findings -

It […] prepares therapists to work confidently with clients from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Being a multilingual speaker myself, I struggled in learning the phonetic sounds in my first year due to examples contextualised to Standard British English.

we tend to start with English […] I think a flipped learning approach would be better suited to ensuring stronger confidence in multilingual phonetics.
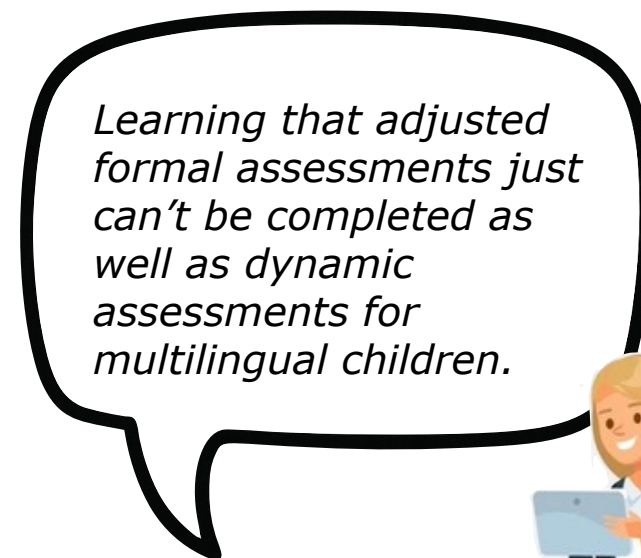
Why do you think phonetics training is important as a future SLT?

What are the main challenges in learning non-English phonetic features?

Preliminary findings -

it was interesting that patient wanted to have therapy in their second, less dominant language.

Learning that adjusted formal assessments just can't be completed as well as dynamic assessments for multilingual children.

Was there a specific 'aha! moment' during your training or clinical experience when your understanding of multilingualism changed in a meaningful way? Please describe.

Output

We will share our findings in an article for the **RCSLT Bulletin**, encouraging more discussion within the SLT community.

We will apply for more **funding** to continue this research.

In the future, we want to create a **practical guideline** for educators to help them teach phonetics and phonology in a more inclusive way *à l*a "NHS handbook" therapy pack with guidelines for clients, carers/parents, and therapists.

We want to **compare SLT education** in the UK with other countries Europe and Asia to ensure the long-term impact of our work.
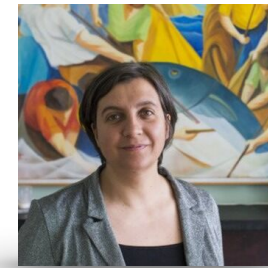
Thank you!

Prof Andrew Nevins
a.nevins@ucl.ac.uk

Davide Di Prete
d.diprete@ucl.ac.uk

Dr Maria Garraffa
m.garraffa@uea.ac.uk

DECOLONISING THE CURRICULUM

Questions, Comments, Feedback

References

Gréaux M, Gibson JL, Katsos N. (2024): "It's not just linguistically, there's much more going on: The experiences and practices of bilingual paediatric speech and language therapists in the UK." in *Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2024 Sep-Oct;59(5)*:1715-1733. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.13027.

Hoff E, Core C., (2015): "What Clinicians Need to Know about Bilingual Development." in *Semin Speech Lang. 2015 May;36(2)*:89-99. doi: 10.1055/s-0035-1549104.

Pert, S., (2022): *Working with Speech and Language Disorders in a Bilingual Context: A Home Language Approach.* Routledge, Speechmark Publishing Ltd.

Rees, R., Smith, C., Loke, A. & Nightingale, R. (2024): "The experiences of home-domiciled and international ethnic minority students on a pre-registration speech and language therapy training programme: A qualitative study." In *Int J Lang Commun Disord., 59,* 2265–2278. https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.13078

Simon Eten Angyagre and Ysabel Hannam (2022): Cultures of Decolonisation at UCL. UCL's Grand Challenge of Cultural Understanding Working Group, London, UK.

Timmins et al., (2024): "Working toward Phonetics Competencies: An investigation of the current provision and techniques for teaching clinical phonetics and phonology within UK and Ireland based HEIs" in *Colloquium of the British Association of Academic Phoneticians*, Cardiff, UK, 25-27 Mar 2024.

Handbooks and booklets

Decolonising Philosophy. A toolkit, SOAS University of London 2023/24 SOAS, Co-Creator Internship Project [link]

NHS handbook speech sound awareness therapy pack, Solent, NHS Trust

The RCSLT Bulletin Autumn 2023, "*Focus on diversity. No language barrier*", p. 19 [link]

The RCSLT Curriculum guidance, March 2021 [link]

The RCSLT Strategic vision: 2022-2027 [link]