

Variation in Phonemic Representation in British English Dictionaries and Its Implications for Non-Native Speakers

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Naturally, a speaker's misproduction of speech sounds may disorient the listener. If the listener has to struggle to understand the utterance, they might miss the message, leaving the speaker's intended meaning unclear. Thus, this study sought to examine how British dictionaries assist non-native learners in mastering English speech sounds, analyse these dictionaries' effectiveness in helping non-native speakers acquire accurate pronunciation, and identify the specific challenges non-native speakers face when using the dictionaries. Framed in Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory and Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Theory, the study used a comparative qualitative research design to analyse 27 screenshots from six notable British dictionaries, categorised into six themes. Findings revealed how various British dictionaries present phonemic transcriptions, represent vowel phonemes, and mark prosody. It was also found that formatting is disrupted in some dictionaries, and there are instances of non-correspondence between offline mobile and online versions. The researcher concludes that dictionaries serve different lexicographic purposes and target specific users, so some lexicographic features are pedagogically intentional rather than errors. Teachers are advised to recognise this and review dictionary contents to determine which dictionaries to use and how. The researcher recommends that dictionary makers maintain consistency in lexicographic entries to reduce cognitive load on both teachers and learners.

Keywords: British dictionaries, English, speech sounds, teaching, learning, challenges

Introduction

English remains the language of choice for many in the 21st century, maintaining its position as a widely spoken second language and a widely spoken first language. Crystal (2003, p. 26) observes that "English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as 'owned' by any single nation." Its global appeal has led speakers of other languages to adopt it, prompting non-English-speaking communities to use it as their lingua franca, official, or national language. Accordingly, Plonski et al. (2013, p. 1) report that Rwanda, once a French-speaking country, makes English an official language. This move is also taken by Burundi and Gabon, while South Sudan also adopts English. Assan and Walker (2018) similarly note that Rwanda, which has French as its colonial language, switches to English in late 2008. Additionally, Crystal (2003, p. 5) notes that "in 1996... English replaced French as the chief foreign language in schools in Algeria (a former French colony)."

English dominates global media, the internet, entertainment, and international communication and conferences. Cruttenden (2014, p. 6) affirms that "The common language is almost always English even in situations where none of the participants is a native speaker of English," making proficiency in it highly sought

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after. Learners therefore focus on all four language skills, speaking, writing, reading, and listening, with speaking often taking priority. The importance of pronunciation to spoken proficiency is highlighted by Reid (2016, p. 19), who notes that “correct pronunciation is without doubt a fundamental feature of successful communication in the English language.” Spoken proficiency depends on accurate speech sound production, with stress, aspiration, intonation, and rhythm contributing to meaning. In this regard, Carley et al. (2018, p. 35) explain that “The learner has to work out the phonemic inventory of the new language and all the phonetic variants.” Dictionaries serve as learning tools by providing information on word meanings, pronunciation, and usage, allowing students to study independently with minimal guidance.

Correct pronunciation is a challenge for many non-native speakers, particularly where opportunities for early pronunciation learning are limited. Reid (2016, p. 19) advises that “attention should be paid to teaching pronunciation right from the beginning of English language teaching.” Many communities, particularly non-native ones, overlook pronunciation in English language learning. For example, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) only introduced an Oral English test in 1995, even though English had been spoken in West African countries for over a century. Moreover, Nigeria’s National Primary Schools Curriculum was revised in 2013 to incorporate Phonetics into English Studies (Ogunbekun, 2023).

Without proper guidance during language acquisition, learners may struggle to master English speech sounds, carrying these challenges into later stages of learning. This often results from a lack of resources, poor-quality learning materials (Ndububa, 2025c), unqualified teachers, and weak language environments. With these obstacles in mind, this study examines the role of dictionaries in learning English speech sounds. While dictionaries assist with word meanings, pronunciation, and usage, their varying content can complicate English learning. As Yoshida (2013, p. 177) observes, “The English spelling system does not have a good reputation. In fact, most learners probably think it’s a hopeless mess.”

This study specifically investigates how dictionaries, particularly British ones, affect learning English speech sounds, whether used independently or under a tutor’s guidance. While assessing how British dictionaries impact teaching English speech sounds to non-native speakers, it is the objective of this study to:

- i. Examine how British dictionaries present phonetic transcriptions and pronunciation guidance for non-native learners;
- ii. Analyze the effectiveness of British dictionaries in helping non-native speakers acquire accurate English pronunciation;
- iii. Identify the specific challenges non-native English speakers face when learning speech sounds using British dictionaries.

This study is valuable to teachers seeking to understand why apparently serious English learners still perform poorly in real-world spoken English use and examinations. It guides Phonology teachers in using major British dictionaries effectively without complicating language learning. Addressing a research gap, this is the first comprehensive examination of the authoritativeness of selected dictionaries considered collectively. Its findings will help learners and teachers maximise the benefits of these dictionaries rather than view them as unhelpful.

This study examines the impact of selected British dictionaries on learning English speech sounds by analysing their phonological representations. Only mobile digital and online versions are considered, as they are the most recently updated. The perceived decline in the revision of print dictionaries might be in line with Lewis and Mees’ (2017, p. 353) prediction that “in the not very distant future it is probable that paper dictionaries will be found only in libraries if not only in museums.” The focus is on the graphic representation of pronunciation.

Recorded pronunciations and text-to-speech synthesis are not included. The study is mainly for non-native English speakers and secondarily for native speakers interested in these dictionaries' impact on non-native learners of English speech sounds.

Literature Review

Dictionaries and the Teaching of English Speech Sounds

Dictionaries serve learners at different proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Gouws (2010, p. 55) explains that identifying dictionary users determines their functions and structure. At the beginner level, learners, whether juvenile or adult, use dictionaries to understand word meanings. Speech sounds are taught with visual and audio aids while the focus remains on accurate sound production. Emphasising the importance of phoneme contrasts at this stage, Carley et al. (2018, p. 35) note, "Your first task is to make sure you never lose a phoneme contrast." Yeh (2026) also recommends sound-letter patterns which learners find interesting.

At the intermediate level, learners with expanded vocabularies grasp additional dictionary features like phonetic transcriptions, synonyms, antonyms, homophones, and word usage. Learners at this stage are also familiar with pronunciation respelling, which guides them through phonemic transcriptions. After mastering phonemes at the beginner level, they focus on pronunciation and the application of segmental and suprasegmental features of spoken English and transcribed English sounds.

At the advanced level, where most learners near the end of secondary education, they refine pronunciation considering prosodic features, such as intonation, speed, and rhythm. They use dictionaries with the aim of attaining native speaker proficiency, creating and identifying phonetic transcriptions of English expressions. Some of these learners acquire dictionaries designed for native speakers, emphasising the significance of Contrastive Analysis. Al-khresheh (2016, p. 336) describes Contrastive Analysis as "a complementary and necessary part of the theory of SLA, one that cannot be ignored."

This study aims at the advanced and, to some extent, intermediate stages of learning English speech sounds for non-natives. At these levels, learners engage with dictionaries to meet their needs. Some learners acquire multiple advanced dictionaries for comparison. The need for continued practice in pronunciation is similarly emphasised by Yoshida (2013, p. 60), who confirms that learners "need plenty of practice with language in realistic contexts to master its use, and the same is true about teaching pronunciation." The reputation of dictionaries and scholarly reviews influence users to combine different dictionaries for a more effective learning experience. Since no dictionary satisfies every lexicographic need, learners use multiple sources for a comprehensive understanding.

Teaching and learning speech sounds is particularly challenging for non-native speakers. Reid (2016, p. 19) draws attention to this difficulty, observing that "it is quite common to assimilate English sounds to the mother tongue sounds and to apply other suprasegmental features of the native language to pronunciation of English". Consequently, Gouws (2010, p. 56) advises that "the lexicographer should realise that the specific dictionary has a pedagogical assignment. The presentation and treatment should be done accordingly."

Dictionaries include phonetic representations to support non-native speakers learning speech sounds. Modern digital dictionaries further support learning by offering spoken features for pronunciation practice. This allows tutors and students to improve by studying phonetic transcriptions through various dictionary tools. While Sustarsic (2005, p. 88) argues that "sounds and letters in English simply don't agree," Yoshida (2013, p. 177) maintains that most English words do follow regular spelling-sound patterns, even if they can sometimes be

complex. Kelly (2000, p. 123) reinforces this view, noting that “English spelling is not as irregular as it seems,” with research showing that 80% of words adhere to consistent spelling rules. To ensure effective instruction, teachers should master pronunciation and transcription, especially for words with irregular grapheme-phoneme relationships.

Dictionaries play a key role in teaching accurate pronunciation and other language skills, making them reliable reference tools. Atkins and Rundell (2008, p. 45) explain that dictionaries’ “generalizations about word behaviour approximate closely to the ways in which people normally use (and understand) language when engaging in real communicative acts.” Dictionaries help uncover word properties that a teacher may not have learned from a native speaker or that a student may have misheard from a teacher. For instance, they show that “key” and “quay” are pronounced the same, “ewe” sounds like “you,” and “suite” rhymes with “sweet,” not “suit.” They also clarify words with identical spellings but different pronunciations, like “bow” (rhyming with “sow”) and “bow” (rhyming with “cow”). Phonetic transcription makes a word’s internal sound properties visible, helping learners connect sounds to spelling. Its usefulness is further highlighted by Yoshida (2013, p. 17), who points out: “Recorded words slip by quickly, and their sounds can be hard to catch, especially if the sound quality from tiny speakers is not clear, if there’s background noise, or if the user of the device must keep the volume turned low to avoid disturbing others.”

The Historical Development of Pronunciation Representation in English Dictionaries

The English language has never had a regulatory body to standardise its usage, unlike French, which has the Académie Française, and Spanish, which has the Real Academia Española. Scholars and lexicographers like Kenrick (1773) and Johnson (1755) attempt to determine what constitutes English vocabulary. In emphasising the importance of pronunciation to the stability of the language, Johnson (1747, p. 22) asserts that “closely connected with orthography is Pronunciation, the stability of which is of great importance to the duration of a language.”

Before and after Johnson, scholars sought to document English pronunciation in dictionaries. Lewis and Mees (2017, p. 334) note that Bailey (1727), in guiding users on pronunciation, was the first “to indicate with full regularity the positions of tonic stresses in all words,” while Kenrick (1773), imitating Bailey’s stress marking, was “the first ever to supply full pronunciations for practically all his entries”. Before the 16th century, lexicographers did not include pronunciation guides, though some scholars examined the relationship between English letters and sounds. Continuing these efforts to refine pronunciation representation, Murray (1884) introduces raised dots for stress marking instead of Bailey and Kenrick’s vertical strokes, as in “a·bov” instead of “a’bov,” for “above.” Lewis and Mees (2017) confirm that this system remained in use in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1989, when it was replaced by the phonetic notation developed by the International Phonetic Association (IPA).

As Barber et al. (2009, p. 245) observe, “Speakers often vary their speech according to the social context and the effect they wish to have.” In response to the need to represent speech sounds consistently, the International Phonetic Association introduced a phonetic alphabet. Otto Jespersen initially suggested the idea to Paul Passy, a French linguist, who led the association’s formation in 1886 (formally named in 1897). The IPA was designed to represent spoken sounds in writing. Explaining the rationale for this representation, the IPA (1999, p. 3) states, “It is desirable to have a consistent way of representing the sounds of language in written form.” Crystal (2010, p. 166) states its key principle: “There should be a separate letter for each distinctive sound, and that the same

symbol should be used for that sound in any language in which it appears.” Though “modified and extended several times” (Crystal, 2010, p. 166), the IPA was widely accepted for its simplicity and comprehensiveness.

The IPA’s effectiveness is evident in the success of Jones (1917)’s *The English Pronouncing Dictionary* (EPD), the first English dictionary to use the IPA for phonetic transcription. Lewis and Mees (2017, p. 348) describe it as “an instant and lasting success”. Wells (2000, p. vii) further notes, “EPD has set the standard against which other dictionaries must inevitably be judged.” Major English dictionaries have since adopted the IPA for pronunciation transcription.

The Use and Development of IPA in English Dictionary Pronunciation Representation

Cruttenden (2014, p. 4) traces the development of standard pronunciation, noting that “A standard pronunciation has been evolving at least since the invention of printing in the fifteenth century... Since then the direction of change has been towards dilution of what was called ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP).” British English dictionaries commonly transcribe pronunciation using the IPA, including both native-oriented dictionaries and those designed for learners. In discussing American dictionary practices, Sustarsic (2005, p. 88) notes that some American dictionary authors “in order to compensate for the lack of a sufficient number of letters... make use of various digraphs and diacritics”. Barber et al. (2009, p. 248) also observe a major phonological distinction in North American English, noting that “the speech of the vast majority of Americans and Canadians, however, is rhotic, and one consequence of this is that the centring diphthongs /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/ do not exist in their system.”

The broad representational scope of the IPA is emphasised by the IPA (1999, p. 159), which describes the alphabet as “intended to be a set of symbols for representing all the possible sounds of the world’s languages.” Thus, it can represent languages with or without established orthographies. The IPA was developed to provide “a set of phonetic symbols which would be given different articulatory values, if necessary, in different languages” (The IPA, 1999, p. 195). Explaining the variation that may arise in the use of these symbols, Crystal (2010, p. 161) notes that “the changes in symbol reflect different interpretations by the authors of the relationships between the sounds.”

The IPA uses symbols and diacritics to represent speech sounds and phonetic properties, while slant strokes and square brackets delimit phonemic and phonetic transcriptions. Importantly, the IPA (1999, p. 4) clarifies the limits of its representational system: “The IPA does not provide symbols to indicate information, such as spoken rapidly by a deep, hoarse, male voice”. Since written descriptions alone may not fully convey phonetic categories, the IPA (1999) advises that “anyone intending to use the symbols should receive training in order to learn how to produce and recognize the corresponding sounds with a reasonable degree of accuracy.”

Given the IPA’s usefulness in representing pronunciation, dictionaries apply it according to their lexicographic objectives and audience. As languages and dialects vary, so do phonetic transcriptions of similar words across English varieties. Recognising each lexicographic project’s right to analyse sound properties as it chooses, the IPA (1999, p. 30) affirms that it does not provide “a single ‘correct’ transcription, but rather the resources to express any analysis so that it is widely understood.”

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Changing Models of British English Pronunciation and Their Lexicographic Representation

As Cruttenden (2014, p. 325) observes, “Because of the pride of place given to grammar... there has been a tendency to place less and less importance on the teaching of pronunciation.” While grammar may be prioritised, pronunciation still plays a crucial role in conveying meaning and enhancing a speaker’s social image. The effect of inaccurate pronunciation on listeners is highlighted by Carley et al. (2018, pp. 32-33), who note, “Even if people can understand what you are saying, an off-target pronunciation may still sound comical, irritating or distracting to listeners.”

Jones (1922, p. iii) emphasises the importance of phonetic knowledge for adult learners, stating that “no adult foreigner is likely to acquire a really good pronunciation of the English language unless he makes a scientific study of the English speech-sounds and their distribution in connected speech.” Long before English expanded widely in the 20th century, RP was the accepted standard. However, as English evolved, pronunciation moved beyond RP. Cruttenden (2014, p. 78) traces this development, noting that “In the latter half of the 12th century the type of pronunciation represented as RP changed considerably... So we get a modern type of pronunciation used by a wider range of people and specifically called ‘Modern RP’ by some writers.” Lindsey (2019, p. vii) similarly affirms that “contemporary standard British speech differs from the British upper class accent of the last century, RP”.

The changing social status of RP is further noted by MacMahon (1998, p. 395), who observes that “since the late 12th century, RP has been gradually lessening in social prestige, and is no longer used by many members of the social and professional groups with which it was traditionally associated.” Lindsey (2019, p. v) likewise confirms that “the existing descriptions of standard British English pronunciation, known as RP, are outdated. People who speak like me now sound old-fashioned.”

Dictionaries adapt to changes in pronunciation, so phonetic transcriptions in older editions differ from modern ones. Reflecting this need for updated transcription, Carley et al. (2018, p. 37) recommend replacing /e/, /æ/, and /eə/ with /ɛ/, /a/, and /ɛ:/ for a more accurate reflection of current British English. Still, Lindsey (2019, p. vii) remarks, “around the world, knowledge of British pronunciation is still rooted in RP.”

Dictionaries follow specific transcription systems, shaped by their aims, users, and the language’s state. Explaining the reasons for differences between transcription systems, Carley et al. (2018, p. 38) explain, “Different writers use different symbols to represent the... phonemes of English. This is partly because writers have different personal preferences... It has consequently become necessary to adapt the symbols to fit in better with present-day pronunciation.” The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) similarly notes, “In deciding what information is most useful to OED users, we are not limited to IPA symbols or conventions and can adapt them as needed.” Leicester (2020) encourages learners not to be discouraged by unexpected transcription differences but to consider their purpose and meaning.

The importance of selecting an appropriate pronunciation model for instruction is emphasised by Cruttenden (2014, p. 326), who advised, “Teachers must not avoid using some model of pronunciation and explicitly teaching towards it, but this model should be within reach of at least some members of their class.” Using outdated IPA systems makes it hard to teach sounds, especially when students encounter varying transcriptions across dictionaries. Cruttenden (2014, p. 325) further stresses that “decisions about priorities in pronunciation... are probably more acute in pronunciation teaching than in other areas.” Lindsey (2019, p. viii) reveals the continuing effect of RP-based instruction, stating, “I’m sometimes told by non-native users of

English that their native speaker friends find their pronunciation old-fashioned: generally speaking, this is because they were taught RP.” Hence, teachers’ choices and guidance are crucial for helping learners master English sounds (Ndububa, 2025b).

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily framed within Sweller’s (1988) Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which posits that learning is most effective when instruction does not overload working memory but facilitates the development of schemas. As Paas et al. (2004, p. 7) note, CLT compares learning conditions not just by performance, but also by the mental effort involved. Similarly, Sweller et al. (1998, p. 266) emphasise that cognitive load has both task-based (mental load) and learner-based (mental effort) dimensions, both of which influence performance. Since learning pronunciation from phonetic transcriptions requires cognitive effort, particularly for learners unfamiliar with IPA symbols or certain transcriptions, this theory aligns with the study’s focus on the challenges of teaching English speech sounds to non-native learners. According to Sweller et al. (1998, p. 259), “Curriculum materials can differ substantially in the extent to which they impose a working memory load.” Therefore, as Uzun (2022, p. 436) points out, “A crucial factor to be considered in instruction is the level of the expertise in a given group of learners.” This principle applies to teachers who design pedagogical methods and lexicographers who create dictionaries for specific users. Sweller et al. (1998, p. 251) conclude that CLT offers guidelines for presenting information in ways that promote learner activities and optimise performance.

This study is also grounded in Lado’s (1957) Contrastive Analysis Theory (CAT), which suggests that comparing two languages reveals differences that aid second language learning. CAT asserts that learners find it easier to learn a language with similarities to their own but face challenges when the target language differs. As Lado (1957, p. 2) notes, a student learning a foreign language finds similar elements easy and different ones difficult. CAT helps explain why some English speech sounds differ from a learner’s native phonological system. Gass and Selinker (2001, p. 72) note that contrastive analysis “isolates what needs to be learnt and what does not need to be learnt in an SLL situation.” Lado (1957, p. 1), quoting Fries, adds that the most effective materials are based on a scientific comparison of the target language and the learner’s native language. Despite criticism, current research has revived interest in CAT as an essential part of the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLC). According to Al-khresheh (2016, p. 330), CAT has emerged as “one of the most significant studies ever made in describing systems of languages.”

While these two theories complement each other, CAT identifies similarities and differences between the learner’s first language and English, while CLT provides a framework for considering the cognitive demands involved in processing pronunciation information. In mastering pronunciation using dictionary transcriptions, intrinsic cognitive load relates to the complexity of the learning material in relation to the learner’s prior knowledge, while extraneous cognitive load relates to the way the information is presented. Incorrect transcriptions, inconsistent representations, or unclear pronunciation information may therefore increase extraneous cognitive processing. CLT aims to reduce extraneous load while managing intrinsic load according to the learner’s level. CAT, on the other hand, identifies linguistic similarities and differences that may affect the learning of English speech sounds. Within the CLT framework, unfamiliar target-language elements may increase the cognitive demands of learning when they interact with other elements of the learning task. A combination of these two theories addresses the research objectives.

Methodology

This study follows a comparative qualitative research design. As Creswell and Poth (2017, p. 100) note, “We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored.” This design involves systematically collecting and analyzing real-world materials that capture both routine and complex situations.

The dataset is purposively selected and comprises 27 screenshots from the mobile and online versions of selected dictionaries, with print editions excluded because the study focuses on their digital versions. The screenshots are cropped to remove personal or irrelevant details but are not altered in any way that could misrepresent the content or introduce bias. As Nielsen (2018, p. 86) cautions, such edits should not result in “improbable, unrealistic or wrong statements that distort a fair presentation of the dictionary.”

Analysis is conducted with attention to all relevant aspects of the dictionary data. In keeping with Nielsen’s (2018, p. 87) view, reviews must remain “neutral in the sense that they should contain all material and relevant aspects regardless whether they affect the reviewers’ assessments positively or negatively.”

Data Analysis

The Orthographic Framing of Phonemes

Data in this section shows how the selected British dictionaries enclose phonemes when giving transcriptions.

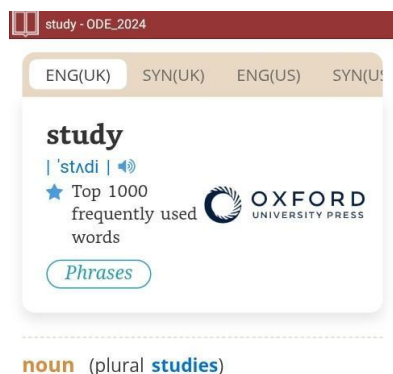


Image 1. ODE — study.

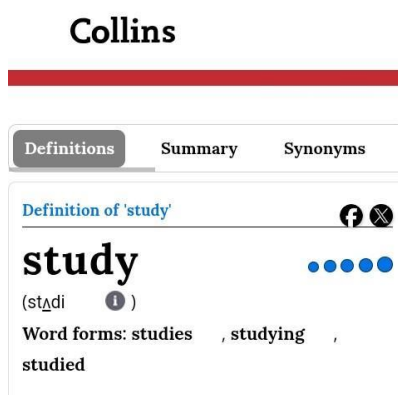


Image 2. LDOCE — study.

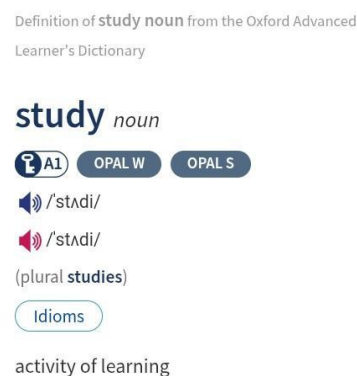


Image 3. OALD — study.

Figure 1. Orthographic framing of phonemic representations.

The above image data show mobile screenshots of selected British dictionaries displaying phonemic transcriptions for “study.” Image 1, from the Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE), uses vertical strokes (| |), while image 2, from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), uses round brackets “().” Image 3, from the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD), uses slant strokes (/ /). The first and second images differ from the IPA (1999, p. 27) convention that “conventionally... symbols for the phonemes of a language are placed within oblique lines.”

In image 4, the ODE transcribes “buy” as /bʌɪ/, differing from the /baɪ/ transcription in image 6. Image 5, a screenshot of the ODE, also uses /bʌɪ/, whereas the OALD in image 6 uses /baɪ/ (see Figure 2). The difference reflects variation in the phonemic transcription conventions adopted by the dictionaries.

Phonemic Representations of a Closing Diphthong



Image 4. OED — buy.



Image 5. ODE — buy.

Definition of **buy** verb from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

buy verb

A1

/baɪ/

/baɪ/

+ Verb Forms

Idioms

Phrasal Verbs

Image 6. OALD — buy.

Figure 2. Phonemic representation of a closing diphthong.

Representing the Open-mid Central Unrounded Vowel

Some British dictionaries do not transcribe the open-mid central unrounded vowel the same way. Below are the results from six notable British dictionaries for comparison (see Figure 3).



Image 7. CD+ — bird.



Image 8. LDOCE — bird.

Definition of **bird** noun from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

bird noun

A1

/bɜːd/

/bɜːrd/

Idioms

1 a creature that is covered with feathers and has a beak and wings



Image 9. OALD — bird.



Image 10. CD — bird.



Image 11. OED — bird.



Image 12. ODE — bird.

Figure 3. Representation of the open-mid central unrounded vowel.

The images above show phonemic transcriptions of “bird.” Images 7, 8, and 9, from the Cambridge Dictionary (CD), LDOCE, and OALD respectively, use /bɜːd/. Image 10, from Collins Dictionary, shows /bɜːrɪd/, in which the superscript “r” indicates an /r/ that may be pronounced in rhotic varieties. Images 11 and 12, from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and ODE respectively, use /əː/, a schwa with a length mark. These transcriptions demonstrate variation in the phonemic representation of the same word across the dictionaries.

Divergent Representations of Identical Lemmas

Dictionaries employ different conventions in making entries, particularly in phonemic transcriptions. A schwa may be added or omitted, a different stress pattern may be used, or other suprasegmental features may vary. Unlike the previous sections, where novel phonemic combinations appeared, the six images below show variations in the representation of common phonemes (see Figure 4).



Image 13. CD+ — strength.



Image 14. OALD — strength.

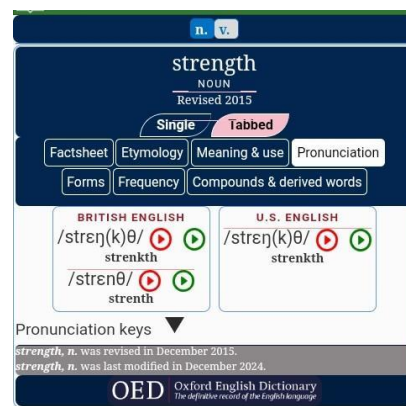


Image 15. OED — strength.



Image 16. LDOCE — oppor.

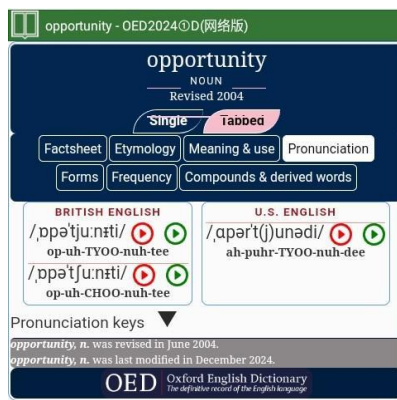


Image 17. OED — oppor.

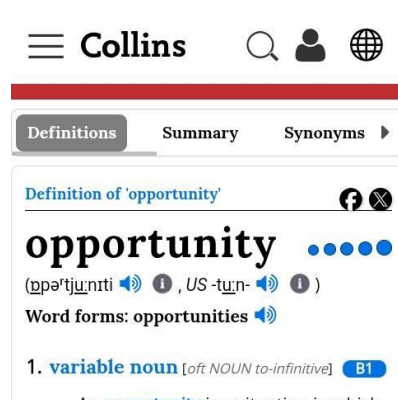


Image 18. CD — opportunity.

Figure 4. Variation in the representation of identical lemmas.

Image 13, from the CD, transcribes “strength” as /streŋθ/, while image 14, from OALD, shows /streŋkθ/, representing an additional /k/ segment. Image 15, from the OED, shows /streŋ(k)θ/, indicating that /k/ is optional, and /streŋθ/, corresponding to the transcription in image 13.

Dictionaries also differ in their transcription of “opportunity” across images 16 to 18. Image 16, from LDOCE, gives /ˌɒpəˈtjuːnəti/, while image 17, from the OED, shows /ˌɒpəˈtjuːnəti/ and /ˌɒpəˈtjuːnəti/, with differences in the representation of the relevant vowels and consonants. Image 18, from Collins Dictionary, shows

/ɒpə'tju:nɪ/, similar to the transcription in image 16 but with the dictionary's /r/ convention. The transcription also underlines two vowels, each occurring within a stressed syllable, indicating a dictionary-specific convention for marking stress.

Inconsistencies in the OALD's Phonemic System

Ndububa (2025a, pp. 61-62) highlights inconsistencies in the transcription of repeated dialectal entries and the representation of pronunciation according to word origin in the OALD. Further inconsistencies in its phonemic representations are shown as follows (see Figure 5):



Image 19. Henry VIII.



Image 20. Wisden.



Image 21. Drachma.



Image 22. The Commons.



Image 23. R A (Rab) Butler.



Image 24. (The) Yukon.

Figure 5. Inconsistencies in the OALD phonemic system.

Image 19 shows the offline mobile version of the OALD with /ˈhenri ɪtʃ/ for “Henry VIII,” whereas the online version gives /ˈhenri ɪtʃθ/.

In image 20, the four audio icons are misaligned with the corresponding transcriptions, leaving the final transcription without an icon.

Image 21 shows two plural forms of “drachma” but provides only one transcription, making it unclear which form it represents. In image 22, the transcription omits the determiner in the headword: /ˈkɒmənz/ is given without /ðə/. Image 23 reveals another inconsistency: R. A. (“Rab”) Butler is transcribed as /ˌræb ˈbʌtlə(r)/, omitting the initials “R” and “A.”

Finally, image 24 provides a full transcription for a lemma beginning with “the.” Ndububa (2025a, p. 65) confirms that both the offline and online versions of the OALD typically omit transcription for “the” when it appears in brackets, making the treatment in image 24 inconsistent with this pattern.

Multiple Interpretations of the Schwa and Unstressed Vowel Sounds Across Dictionaries

A natural English sentence contains many weak syllables, in which vowels may undergo reduction in connected speech. Some phonologists classify weak vowels as schwas, while others distinguish between them. This section examines how different British dictionaries represent the schwa and other unstressed vowel sounds.

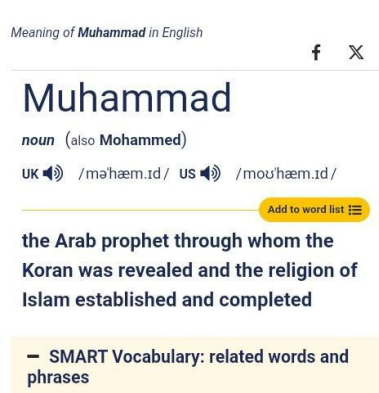


Image 25. CD+ — Muha.

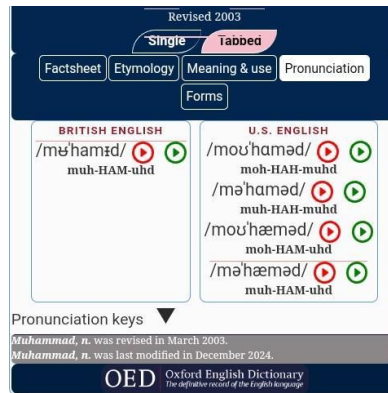


Image 26. OED — Muha.



Image 27. LDOCE — Muha.

Figure 6. Variation in the representation of schwa and unstressed vowels across dictionaries.

In image 25, the CD transcribes “Muhammad” as /mə'hæm.ɪd/, while image 26, from the OED, gives /mə'hæm.ɪd/. Image 27 gives /mou'hæm.ɪd/, differing from image 25 in the representation of the first and final vowels (see Figure 6). The three dictionaries therefore differ in their representation of the weak vowels in “Muhammad.”

Findings

In the data presentation and discussion, it was found that selected British dictionaries differ in their ways of enclosing phonemic transcriptions. The OED uses vertical strokes, LDOCE uses round brackets, while the OALD uses slant strokes. The study also found that, in addition to the new vowels identified by Carley et al. (2018, p. 37), some British dictionaries use other vowel phoneme representations. Thus, instead of the regular diphthong /aɪ/ used in OALD and Cambridge Dictionary, the OED and ODE use /aɪ/. Findings also revealed that the open-mid central unrounded vowel commonly represented as /ɜ:/ is transcribed differently in some British dictionaries. The OED and ODE represent it as /ɜ:/, while LDOCE indicates rhoticity, suggesting a pronunciation variety different from non-rhotic RP.

As shown in images 13 to 15, some British dictionaries represent “strength” with /k/, others without it, while some indicate that /k/ is optional. Images 16 to 18 and 25 to 27 also show differences in the representation of schwa and unstressed vowels. The OALD, as shown in images 19 to 23, exhibits inconsistencies in some of its digital entries, including misplaced audio icons, incomplete transcriptions, and the omission of initials. The OALD, for instance, typically omits transcription for the bracketed “the” in the initial parts of lemmas but was found to transcribe “the” in a compound lemma, inconsistent with its usual pattern. It was also found to omit transcription for “the” where the article is not bracketed. Finally, prosody is marked differently by British

dictionaries: in the online Collins Dictionary, vowel phonemes are underlined to indicate stress placement, with no distinction between primary and secondary stress, while the OED marks an unstressed vowel with a line.

Conclusion

In line with the first objective of this study, it was observed that these dictionaries serve different lexicographic purposes and target specific users. Therefore, some of their outputs are not errors but intentional features. Teachers, applying CAT alongside CLT, should choose dictionaries that suit their learners and review their pronunciation guides and objectives to avoid overloading students' working memory.

For the second objective, it was found that these dictionaries are useful pedagogical tools for learning English speech sounds. Teachers must recognize their different purposes and approaches when selecting and using them. Regarding the third objective, it was found that unfamiliarity with a dictionary's purpose and style can hinder learning. While consulting multiple dictionaries can broaden learning, it can also be confusing if learners do not understand the principles underlying each one. Learners who understand the aims of the dictionaries they use are better able to evaluate their different representations.

Finally, CAT shows that differences between the learner's first language and English can affect the learning of English speech sounds. Learning English speech sounds through British dictionaries can be effective, but teachers and learners must remember that "there can be many systems of phonemic transcription for the same variety of a language, all of which conform fully to the principles of the IPA. Sometimes the differences between the systems result from the fact that more than one phonetic symbol may be appropriate for a phoneme" (The IPA, 1999, p. 30). With this in mind, using multiple dictionaries can expose learners to different representations of pronunciation, though accommodating these differences while maintaining a consistent learning target can be challenging.

Recommendation

The researcher recommends that dictionary makers maintain consistency in lexicographic entries to reduce cognitive load on teachers and learners. Since the novel phonemes examined here are vowels, prospective researchers may explore novel consonants and how dictionaries handle such variations. American transcriptions were not examined in this study and may also be considered.

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