

British accents



We all know Received Pronunciation – that’s the version of British English that is used in coursebooks and dictionaries. But what about all the other accents around the British Isles?

Before you travel to the United Kingdom, you might have the impression from your coursebook that there is only one accent: Received Pronunciation (RP). But if you take a trip around the British Isles, you’ll find a great variation in regional accents. Have a look at a short video to get a taste of accents around the British Isles – just click [here](#). And you might be surprised to learn that there are as many regional accents in the British Isles as there are in the whole of North America.

Despite all the regional accents, why is RP thought to be ‘the’ British accent? It is a neutral accent, using standard English vocabulary (no dialect words) and standard grammar. It came to prominence with the advent of radio and television. When the BBC began broadcasting on radio and later on television, the decision was made to only have speakers of RP and not to allow regional accents. This created an impression of RP as being ‘the’ accent of the United Kingdom, when in fact only 2% of the British population actually spoke it. Of course these days, regional accents are represented all over the media, but many people outside the UK have the impression that RP is the only accent you can hear.

According to a recent poll on the most attractive and least attractive accents from the British Isles, people found the Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester accents the least pleasing on the ear. And the accents from the Republic of Ireland were heard as most attractive, followed by RP and Welsh. In another poll, people were asked to rate accents according to trustworthiness (How likely are you to trust a person with this accent?) and here Yorkshire accents were top of the list, followed by Newcastle-on-Tyne (Geordie accent) and Welsh. There is more to an accent than just the information about the region you are from: a native speaker can also understand something about the speaker’s upbringing and social class. An RP accent suggests that someone is middle or upper class.

Many people notice the north-south divide of the short and long ‘a’. People from the south east have a ‘long a’ and say *ba:th*, [bɑ:θ], and *gra:ss*, [grɑ:s], whereas people from the rest of the UK have a ‘short a’ like the [æ] in *cat*. People from London have a Cockney accent, which pronounces the end ‘th’ like an ‘f’. So instead of *bath* they say [bɑ:f] (with a ‘long a’ of course). Many accents, including Cockney, often drop the initial ‘h’, so instead of *happy*, people say *appy* [æpɪ].

There is plenty of comedy based on accent and the attempt to change people's accents. In *My Fair Lady*, the musical based on the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw, the linguist Professor Higgins makes a bet that he can pass off Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle as a cultured member of society.

If you would like to see a short clip from *My Fair Lady*, then watch [this](#). Professor Higgins identifies all the regional (and London) accents of the people around him in the street.

If you would like to find out more about British regional accents, then click [here](#) for the British Library archive of accents and dialects.

If you would like to use *British accents* as a topic in your lesson, then we have provided you with an activity at A2 level. You'll find it in the following **Teacher's notes**.

Teacher's notes

Let's talk Cockney! (Level A2 and above, 15+ mins)

If possible, watch this [short clip](#) from *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* to see how Eliza learns to pronounce the voiced 'h':

- Ask students whether they can identify regional German accents. Are there some accents that they like more than others?
- Explain that there are regional accents in English as well.
- On the board write: *My Fair Lady* and ask students whether they know the story. (It is an attempt to change a young London girl's accent and manners.)
- If possible watch the clip linked to above in class together.
- On the board write: *In Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen.* (This is the phrase that Eliza has to practise.) (In Hertford, Hereford und Hampshire kommen Wirbelstürme fast nie vor.)
- Tell students to practise saying the sentence with a Cockney accent, dropping the initial 'h'.
- And then students say the phrase in Received Pronunciation.
- Ask students to write short sentences or phrases with words that begin with 'h', for example *Have a happy holiday.; I hope Helen is hungry.*
- Exchange sentences with a partner and ask them to read the sentences aloud like a Cockney!

A path on the grass (Level A2 and above, 5+ mins)

- On the board write [bɑ:θ] and [bæθ]. Explain that both these words mean *bath*, like *bathroom*. The first one is RP pronunciation – students might like to check in their dictionaries to check the pronunciation – and the second is regional pronunciation from most of the British Isles.
- Encourage students to practise saying the two words.
- On the board write: *The path to Bath is on the grass.* (Bath is a famous city in the south-west of England).
- Encourage students to pronounce the 'long a' and then to try the 'short a' version.
- On the board write *ask, fast, last, laugh, past*, and tell students to write a sentence which includes two or more of these words.
- Example sentences: *In the past, I laughed when I was last. I asked her and she laughed. I was fast in the past.*
- Students exchange sentences with a partner and then read the sentences aloud.