

# Accentual Awareness across Cohorts in a Phonetics Course

Authors: Wience Lai, College of Professional and Continuing Education The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract ID: 334

Event: Phonetics 2026 Hong Kong

Subject: 7. Intonation

Presenter Name: Wience Lai

## Objectives:

This study examines accentual awareness and phonetic analytical practices across two cohorts of post-secondary language majors who completed the same phonetics subject in consecutive offerings. It addresses two questions: (1) whether patterns of segmental and suprasegmental analysis remain stable across cohorts under identical instructional and assessment conditions, and (2) whether cohort-level differences emerge in how English accents are selected and represented in assessed explanations when generative AI tools are permitted and increasingly used.

## Methodology

Both cohorts completed the same coursework assignment involving the analysis of authentic, human-produced speech from online videos featuring English accents. Each student selected one accent for comparison with British Received Pronunciation and was required to identify segmental and suprasegmental features, produce International Phonetic Alphabet transcriptions, write a short phonetic analysis, deliver a brief video explanation of accentual differences, and submit a reflective commentary. Task design, assessment criteria, and learning outcomes were identical across cohorts. Generative AI tools were permitted for both cohorts to support drafting of video scripts and written components, with submission features indicating more frequent use in the later cohort. Analysis focused on assessment performance and cohort-level patterns in accent representation across student analyses and video explanations.

## Results

Performance patterns were largely consistent across cohorts. Students in both groups showed strong ability in segmental analysis, accurately identifying consonantal and vocalic features distinguishing accented speech from standard reference models. Explanations were generally clear and well aligned with phonetic concepts. In contrast, suprasegmental analysis was less consistently developed. Descriptions of rhythm, stress, and intonation were often broad and impressionistic, with limited use of systematic phonetic terminology. A cohort-level difference emerged in the range of accents addressed in video explanations and analyses. While the earlier cohort collectively covered a wider variety of English accents, the later cohort converged on a narrower set of accent types, despite identical task requirements and individual-level focus on a single accent. Reflections were predominantly descriptive and showed limited evaluation of learning strategies or analytical limitations, despite increased use of AI-assisted drafting tools.

## Discussion:

The findings suggest that the instructional design supports stable development of accentual awareness across cohorts, particularly at the segmental level. Ongoing difficulty in suprasegmental description highlights the need for more explicit scaffolding in prosodic analysis. The reduced diversity of accents represented across the later cohort points to a shift in analytic selection rather than reduced engagement, possibly reflecting a preference for accent types that are perceived as easier to describe in assessed explanations. Increased AI use may support organisational clarity in explanations, but it does not automatically lead to deeper phonetic or metacognitive insight. These findings underscore the importance of assessment designs that distinguish between well-presented phonetic explanations and learners' underlying analytical competence in AI-supported learning contexts.