

Sounds of English Phonetics

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Abstract

We are unable to speak correctly (properly, confidently and with proper pronunciation). We use language to communicate and establish relationships with people around us. One's pronunciation is acceptable when the listener can understand the speaker's content, nature and meaning without any distortion. Pronunciation differs from region to region. By being careful in speech habits, we can avoid simple mistakes. The style of speaking (pronunciation) is different in different parts of the world. Pronunciation is the manner of uttering or speaking (words and sounds), and good pronunciation is the way of speaking that ordinary people find easy to understand. Daniel Jones defines 'bad' pronunciation as, "a way of talking which is difficult for most people to understand."

Acceptable pronunciation is, clearly intelligible to all ordinary people whereas 'unacceptable pronunciation' refers to a way of talking that is difficult for most people to understand. To, learn correct English pronunciation we must understand sounds and basics of phonetics. Vowel sounds are articulated by the tongue, teeth, or lips.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Sounds, Symbols

INTRODUCTION

When we deal with any language, we must master all the four major communicative aspects of that language. They are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW). We get enough exposure for reading, writing, and listening but for speaking we do not get enough opportunity. Hence, we are unable to speak correctly (properly, confidently and with proper pronunciation). We use language to communicate and establish relationships with people around us. One's pronunciation is acceptable when the listener can understand the speaker's content, nature and meaning without any distortion. Pronunciation differs from region to region. By being careful in speech habits, we can avoid simple mistakes. We know that English is a Universal language used and spoken in different parts of the world like USA, UK, India, Canada, Australia, etc. The style of speaking (pronunciation) is different in different parts of the world. There is nothing called "correct pronunciation" because there is no one right way of speaking. Pronunciation is the manner of uttering or speaking (words and sounds), and good pronunciation is the way of speaking that ordinary people find easy to understand. Daniel Jones defines 'bad' pronunciation as, "a way of talking which is difficult for most people to understand." One should refer to a good dictionary like Oxford's Advanced Learners Dictionary or Cambridge Dictionary to know acceptable English pronunciations of words. Dictionaries give the pronunciation of a word in phonemic symbols; it is essential to be familiar with phonemic transcription. Learning appropriate pronunciation techniques gives one the confidence to avoid common lapses and errors in speaking. A basic understanding of the sound system of the English language is very important in effective oral communication. The ability to produce individual sounds, both in isolation and in combination with other sounds, also plays a significant role in effective oral communication. Pronunciation is far more than the accurate production of individual sounds. Pronunciation is the way a word or a language is usually spoken or the way someone utters the words of a language. To develop proper oral communication proper pronunciation is one of the key factors. It is important to understand the sound system of English, including various aspects such as individual sounds-consonants and vowels. Production of speech, word stress, sentence stress (intonation), or the variations of speech are highly

essential for proper pronunciation.

Varied Pronunciations: Interestingly, there is no such thing called correct pronunciation. The pronunciation of English varies from one country to another and there are marked pronunciation features associated with English spoken in important English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, and Australia. Even within the United Kingdom, there are variations between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. One accent, called Received Pronunciation (RP) has come to be accepted as the standard in the United Kingdom. Thus, it is better to consider pronunciation in terms of ‘acceptable pronunciation’ and ‘unacceptable pronunciation’ rather than correct or incorrect pronunciation. Acceptable pronunciation is, clearly intelligible to all ordinary people whereas ‘unacceptable pronunciation’ refers to a way of talking that is difficult for most people to understand. To, learn correct English pronunciation we must understand sounds and basics of phonetics. Indian speakers of English suffer from a typical problem that is known as Mother Tongue Influence (MTI). Here, the pronunciation of English varies from region to region. As English, is not our mother tongue we speak this language as either a second language or third language. As a result, our vocal cords are already conditioned with the language we speak (mother tongue and in case with a second language). The tinge and touch of mother tongue is reflected in our speech when we utter the English language. While speaking we must consciously avoid MTI to be understood by others. To do that we should try to speak in a neutral accent.

Sounds: When letters are represented by sounds in a logical sequence it is known as phonetics. There is no one to one relationship between letters and sounds in English language. As there are only 26 alphabets/letters but 44 sounds. Sounds are generally categorized by the place of articulation, method of articulation, and voicing. While individual sounds are the most basic elements of a language, they do not mean anything by themselves. However, certain sounds like /l/ at the end of words such as school, chill, kneel, etc. symbolizes prolongation of the sound and /ŋ/ at the end of a word means continuous vibrating sound. Letters are seen and sounds are heard. Letters provide a means of sounds. Each sound is represented by a phonemic symbol. When they do so in a logical manner the essential sounds of any language or dialect are represented consistently. The sounds are represented through IPA symbols.

Classification of Speech sounds: There are total speech 44 sounds in English language as per Received Pronunciation (RP). They are classified as follows. 20 Vowel sounds and 24 Consonant sounds. The vowel sounds are further classified as 12 Monophthongs (pure vowels) and 8 Diphthongs. The monophthongs are further divided into two parts 5 long vowels & 7 short vowels. Vowel Sounds: These types of sounds are produced without stoppage of air. During the production of vowel sounds, the air forms the lungs comes out in an unrestricted manner in a rather continuous stream. Vowel sounds are articulated by the tongue, teeth, or lips. In the process of articulation of a vowel sound the active articulator is raised towards the passive articulator in such a way that there is a sufficient gap between the two for air to escape through the mouth without friction. For example, when speaking the word ‘art’, air escapes freely and continuously without any friction while pronouncing the first sound ‘AH’. Consonant Sounds: These types of sounds are produced by stopping air with the help of lips. To produce the word ‘paper’ our lips try to stop air from passing through while producing the sound ‘p’. Thus, the voice or breath in consonants is partially hindered by the tongue, teeth, lips, or other organs of articulation. The 24 consonant sounds are classified according to the nature of constriction as plosives, affricates, nasal consonants, lateral consonants, and fricatives. Consonant Clusters: A consonant cluster is a group or sequence of consonants that appear together in a syllable without a vowel between them. E.g. In the word splits /spl/ and /ts/ are consonant clusters. It is important to distinguish between consonant clusters and digraphs with which they are often confused. In contrast to a consonant cluster, a digraph is a group of two or more symbols which really stand for just one sound (usually a consonant). In the word ‘chat’, the letters /c/ and /h/ appear contiguously but are not a consonant cluster. Even though, both are separate consonants in other contexts. In this instance, /ch/ is a digraph because the ch sequence represents a single sound in the underlying English sound system. It can also be understood

like this, that consonant cluster can only occur within one syllable. Consonant clusters are more useful as a definition when they may occur across syllable boundaries.

Key features

- A problem-based introduction to phonetics, with more than three hundred exercises integrated into the text to help the student discover and practice the subject interactively.
- Assumes no previous knowledge of phonetics and highlights and explains new terms and concepts when they are first introduced.
- Highlights the differences between speech and writing in Unit One.

Vowel

The term 'vowel' is used to refer to letters used to represent vowel sounds. In the English language, five letters among the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet are called vowels. They are a, e, i, o, and u. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines a vowel as "a letter that represents a vowel sound". Now, let us find out what a vowel sound is.

Vowel Sound

A vowel sound is a speech sound that is pronounced without the lips, tongue, teeth or throat blocking the air produced when uttering the letter. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, a vowel sound is "a speech sound in which the mouth is open, and the tongue is not touching the top of the mouth, the teeth, etc., so that the flow of air is not limited". There are only five vowels in the English language, but there are twenty vowel sounds in total. Out of the twenty, eight of them are called diphthongs. Let us look at the following lists of vowel sounds and diphthongs to have a clearer idea.

- **Classification of Vowels**

Vowels are classified into two – pure vowels and diphthongs.

- **Pure Vowels**

Vowels which have a single vowel sound when pronounced are called pure vowels. The twelve vowel sounds we have mentioned earlier are pure vowels. Words such as announce(ə), fret(e), sun(ʌ), tick(i), please(i:), dot(ʊ), foot(ʊ), food(u:), word(ɜ:), warm(ɔ:), arm(a:) and pant(æ) come under this category. Pure vowels are further classified into two – checked vowels and free vowels. Read on to learn what they are.

- **Checked Vowels**

Among the 12 vowel sounds, 7 of them are considered checked vowels. They are ʌ, e, ə, ʊ, ɪ, æ and ʊ. These vowels cannot occur at the end of open syllables.

- **Free Vowels**

The five vowel sounds u:, i:, ɜ:, a: and ɔ: are considered free vowels. These vowels can be used at the end of open syllables.

- **Types of Vowels/Vowel Sounds**

Vowels/vowel sounds are categorised into two based on the length of the vowel sound and the number of vowels. They are

- Short vowels
- Long vowels

Let us look at each of them in detail.

- **Short Vowels**

Short vowels are those that appear individually in words. These words normally end with consonants. They can, in no way, appear at the end of the last syllable of a word.

Here are a few examples.

- 'a' in 'pan'
- 'e' in 'rent'

- 'i' in 'pit'
- 'o' in 'cot'
- 'u' in 'truck'

• Long Vowels

The term 'long vowels' is used to refer to two or more vowels that appear in words. Words with long vowels can start/end with vowels. Look at the following examples to understand.

- 'a' in 'fake'
- 'e' in 'tedious'
- 'i' in 'blind'
- 'o' in 'rote'
- 'u' in 'cumin'

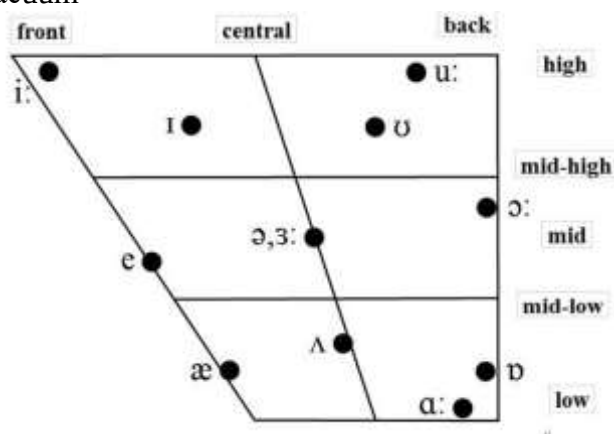
The categorization of vowel sounds as long and short would not be the same. There is a difference. They would include words with diphthongs as well. Let us look at the following examples to comprehend how it works.

Short Vowel Sounds

- 'a' in 'braid', 'falcon', 'steak'
- 'e' in 'furry', 'tread', 'says'
- 'i' in 'women', 'eject', 'houses'
- 'o' in 'entrepreneur', 'cause', 'flaw'
- 'u' in 'flood', 'done', 'son'

Long Vowel Sounds

- 'a' in 'faint', 'weight', 'dainty'
- 'e' in 'receive', 'weak', 'encyclopedia'
- 'i' in 'tight', 'ice', 'eye'
- 'o' in 'blow', 'road', 'door'
- 'u' in 'new', 'queue', 'vacuum'



Consonant

Consonant is a term used to refer to the letters of the English alphabet other than the five vowels (a, e, i, o, u). They include letters that are pronounced by obstructing the flow of air in the vocal tract. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines a consonant as "a speech sound made by completely or partly stopping the flow of air through the mouth or nose".

• Consonant Sounds in English

Like vowels, consonants can also be better perceived by learning their sounds. A consonant sound is a speech sound that is produced by the partial or complete obstruction of air by the lips, teeth, tongue or

throat. The Collins Dictionary defines a consonant sound as “a sound such as ‘p’, ‘f’, ‘n’, or ‘t’ which you pronounce by stopping the air flowing freely through your mouth”. There are 44 speech sounds in total in the English language. Among them, 24 are consonant sounds. Let us look at what they are and how they are classified.

• **Classification of Consonant Sounds**

Consonant sounds are divided into categories based on two aspects, namely,

- The place of articulation – with reference to the parts of the mouth that are used to pronounce the sounds.
- The manner of articulation – with reference to the movement of air from the lungs and through and out of the nose and mouth.

Read on to learn more about the various places and manners of articulation.

• **Place of Articulation**

- Bilabial – the upper lip and lower lip come in complete contact with each other.
- Dental – the tip of the tongue touches the teeth mildly.
- Labio-dental – the lower lip and the upper teeth meet each other.
- Palatal – the body of the tongue touches the hard palate.
- Alveolar – the tip or blade of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge.
- Palato-alveolar – the blade/tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge, and the body of the tongue approaches the hard palate.
- Velar – the body of the tongue meets the soft palate (also called the velum).
- Glottal – the vocal cords come into contact and produce friction.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, understanding the sounds of English, or phonetics, is crucial for accurate pronunciation and effective communication, especially for non-native speakers, as it highlights the complexities of the English sound system and its impact on speech and comprehension.

Pronunciation Accuracy: Learning the sounds of English (phonemes) and how they are produced helps in achieving accurate pronunciation.

Effective Communication: Proper pronunciation is vital for being understood by native English speakers.

Understanding Spoken Language: Recognizing the sounds of English enables better comprehension of spoken language.

Overcoming Pronunciation Challenges: Understanding the sound system helps overcome challenges faced by learners of English as a second language.

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